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Very concerned



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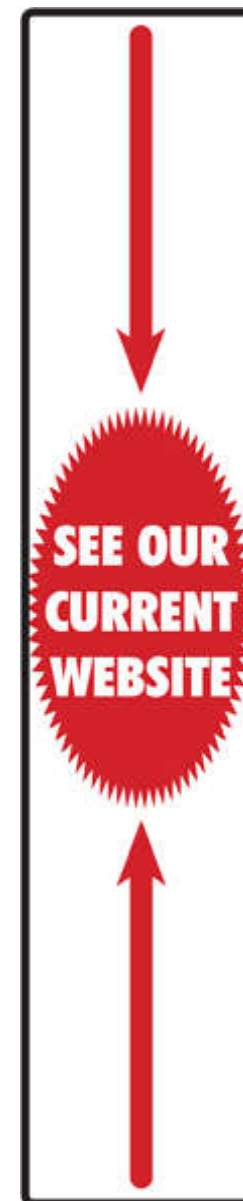
Wednesday, January 29, 2014

NEWS

# From Triumph to South Sudan

## Valley resident Pat Murphy looks back on economic development in a volatile African nation

By [TONY EVANS](#)



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Not concerned at all

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**MAGAZINES**

### Express Staff Writer

“give a man a fish and feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime.” This proverbial saying was on the mind of former Blaine County Planning and Zoning Commissioner Pat Murphy when he took a job three years ago teaching tribesmen in South Sudan how to increase their catch with modern fishing methods.

South Sudan is an arid African country with little modern infrastructure and only 60 miles of paved roads. The country sits on oil reserves, making the political process volatile as tribal groups vie for control of the resource.



Pat Murphy, center, poses for a picture with some of the locals in South Sudan last summer. The area is now engulfed in an intertribal conflict that threatens to tear the new country apart. Photo courtesy of Pat Murphy

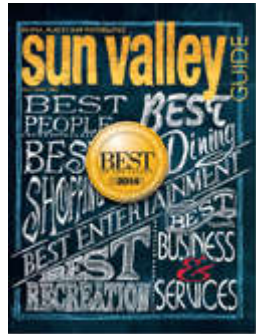
“I was there to provide an alternative to cattle raiding.”

**Pat Murphy**  
Aid worker

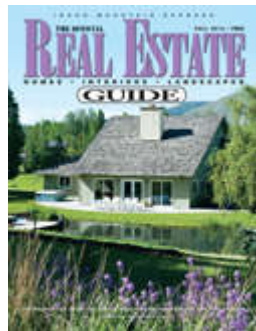
Murphy’s goal was to bring his many years of experience in the commercial fishing industry to a developing country that had no substantial economy beyond pastoralism and cattle raiding.

One million people were killed in Sudan during 22 years of civil war between the tribal south and the predominantly Arab north, before the nation of South Sudan was created in 2011. When Murphy arrived in October 2011 to establish a commercially viable fishing industry along a 130-mile stretch of the Sobat River, the area was flooded with thousands of returning refugees, re-entering the area from nearby Kenya and Uganda.

After spending up to eight months at a time in a mud hut, facing life-threatening challenges while working among the conflicting Nuer and Dinka tribes, Murphy can only hope



- Winter
- Habitat
- Summer



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that his efforts have not been in vain.

“I went there feeling bad about my own situation,” said Murphy. “But then I saw people walking around with no clothes on. When the sun went down, they just lay down in the dirt and went to sleep wherever they were. I gained some much-needed perspective.”

In recent weeks, the area Murphy worked in has been devastated by violence in an escalating conflict that threatens to tear the new country apart.

Murphy, 66, was born in Seattle and has worked on salmon fishing boats since he was 15, putting himself through college and graduate school with his earnings. He owned and operated a small fleet of airplanes in Alaska, bringing salmon from remote native tribes to markets in Anchorage and Homer. He also worked writing a marine sciences curriculum for a college in the Russian Far East, and helped develop fisheries in Bulgaria on the coast of the Black Sea, after the fall of the Soviet Union.

Murphy and his wife, school teacher Daphne Coble, have had a home in the town of Triumph since 1982. They have cruised their sailboat from Seattle as far as South America, living for extended periods in the Florida Keys.

In 1995, a 180-foot salmon-processing boat that belonged to Murphy and Coble sank in Alaska. The couple responded to this economic disaster by launching yet one more adventure; they took jobs teaching school in Khartoum, the capital of Sudan.

“I told Daphne I would go for six months and we ended up staying for four years,” Murphy said.

They studied Arabic. Murphy raced sailboats with Sudanese yachtsmen on the White Nile beside the modern city of Khartoum. The couple returned to Alaska each summer to fish.

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“It’s good to be old and bald in that part of the world, because that means you are deserving of much respect.”

**Pat Murphy**  
Aid worker

Eventually, Murphy made contacts with AECOM, a company funded by USAID to bring economic development to South Sudan. In October 2011, he decided to take what he had learned in Alaska and put it to work on the Sobat River, which marks the border between South Sudan and

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HISTORY



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Ethiopia.

“The only difference between Alaska and South Sudan was that one was cold and one was hot,” he said. “Both had undeveloped infrastructure and a lot of fish. There was a lot of violence in Alaska due to alcohol and drug addiction. In South Sudan, there was tribal conflict.”

Murphy’s project involved bringing together 170 Nuer and Dinka youths from six villages to increase catches of several species of fish from the Sobat River, including the Nile perch, which can reach 300 pounds in weight. The river ecosystem also is home to crocodiles, cobras and many other poisonous snakes. Lions and elephants roam the surrounding countryside. Tribespeople would run down and kill with spears the white-eared cobb, a kind of wild deer, Murphy said.

“It was so different, so weird. And so cool,” he said. “But people were killing one another over cattle.”

He explained that the Arab North had heavily armed the Dinka tribes in the south during the civil war, a measure that had dramatically escalated the violence associated with the traditional practice of cattle rustling.

“With five cows, you could buy an AK-47 [assault rifle]. Thirty cows could buy a wife, and there was no limit to the number of wives one could buy. I was there to provide an alternative to cattle raiding,” Murphy said.

With supplies that included 44 fiberglass canoes, six skiffs with outboard motors, and plenty of netting, lines, hooks and barrels, Murphy set up the beginnings of a fishing industry on a river that had only been fished by hand-held spear. He taught boat-engine mechanics and helped build concrete blocks that would house the first government buildings in the region.

“They were to use the buildings to begin making laws,” he said. “I told them [through an interpreter] that I had made money for my family all of my life by fishing and that I was here to teach them to do the same things. It’s good to be old and bald in that part of the world, because that means you are deserving of much respect.”

The fishery began showing signs of success. Murphy said that during one fishing season, the fishermen made enough money to feed themselves, and to hire two trucks to bring four tons of dried fish to market. At times, the drying fish had to be hidden from ravenous hyenas that were out looking for a free lunch.

Murphy said he never would have survived the challenge

of working in South Sudan without a solar lamp, an iPod music player and a Kindle electronic reader. After returning to Idaho, his wife raised enough money among a number of friends in Ketchum to buy 12 more solar lamps, which Murphy brought back to South Sudan the next year.

“They provide enough light for 60 people to read and study,” he said.

Before he left the country in June, Murphy wrote a three-year economic plan designed to increase fish catches and further develop trade in the area. The program would be based in the city of Bor, population 25,000. But now it seems unlikely that those plans will be implemented.

Seven weeks ago, fighting broke out in South Sudan’s capital city of Juba, between Nuer and Dinka tribespeople vying for power in the new country. The fighting quickly spread to other regions in the country, including Jonglei state and the Sobat River corridor where Murphy’s fishery had been gaining momentum.

“No one really knows how the fighting started, but it’s heart-breaking what has happened,” Murphy said.

“You can’t go back there now. It is ungoverned. The city of Bor is gone. There are bodies everywhere.”

Tony Evans: [tevans@mtexpress.com](mailto:tevans@mtexpress.com)

6.7K

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