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Death of Cod

How the Canadian government oversaw (which is to say virtually directed) the extinction of the greatest fishing ground in history

Review by MARK KURLANSKY

AS the millennium limps to its end, we don't have to look very far afield for apocalyptic scenarios.

We live in a science-fiction world where the oceans are becoming increasingly devoid of life, and mutant fish are raised as food in artificial pens. Every week we read of new disasters, most recently the collapse of a dam in southern Spain that released a toxic sludge pool that flooded and poisoned a once fertile valley.

The standard response to these crises, by the very governments that are supposed to protect us, is somewhat less than a "whoops." Indeed, they have no response. It is a wonder that they can face us at all. That is the issue underlying Michael Harris's new book, *Lament for an Ocean*. Specifically, it is the story of how the Canadian government, in its regulatory capacity, oversaw (which is to say virtually directed) the extinction of the greatest fishing ground in recorded history.

Cod fishing was the prize that lured Europeans to settle in North America, and it is not an exaggeration to say that Canada was founded on the fishing, curing and trading of the codfish off the coast of Atlantic Canada and on the Grand Banks, the so-called northern stock.

The Canadian government not only allowed the destruction of this great national treasure and crucial element in the ecology of the North Atlantic, it helped to engineer it. This crime was perpetrated not out of malice but simply, as is so common, out of short-sighted political expediency.

While it wanted to manage its fish stocks, the Canadian government was also faced with maintaining amicable international relations, providing jobs in the economically depressed Atlantic region, in covering up for past mistakes – in short, on being government. The bad guys were not really bad guys – but make enough mistakes like this and the planet will be destroyed.

LAMENT FOR AN OCEAN
The Collapse of the Atlantic Cod Fishery
A True Crime Story
By Michael Harris
McClelland & Stewart, 342 pages, $29.99

It is, of course, not all the Canadian government's fault. There was the late 19th-century British invention of the net trawler, and the 1954 British invention of the factory ship, and the subsequent outfitting of huge factory fleets by the Soviet Union, Spain and other countries.

But happily, Michael Harris, a seasoned Canadian investigative reporter, does not fall into that popular trap of blaming the foreigners. After all, the major destruction took place after 1977, when the Canadian government had control of a 200-mile exclusive fishing zone around its coast-line.

Factory ships on the Grand Banks may have been responsible for the two-thirds decline in Newfoundland's inshore cod stocks between 1956 and 1977. But the critical destruction, rather than rebuilding what remained, was a Canadian project.

Just what was it the Canadian government was trying to do? Far too many things that had nothing to do with saving fish stocks. In one of Harris's best insights into the inner workings of fishing policy, he describes the Canadian government's quest for international support: "When Korea looked like it was siding with the EU, [then federal fisheries minister Brian] Tobin's deputy minister, Bill Rowat, escorted the member back to Canada's delegate room for a chat with his minister. Tobin was blunt: Canada-Korea relations were on the line; if the Koreans couldn't vote with Canada, they had better abstain." Poland was offered "a little bit of silver hake" off British Columbia in return for supporting Canada's position on the East Coast, an offer that was all the more attractive since Tobin had cancelled its hake contract for supporting the Europeans on a previous North Atlantic Fisheries Organization matter. The Japanese could be counted on because they would do anything to protect their lucrative tuna contract in Canadian waters. "We were, in effect, buying their votes," one Canadian negotiator said. "But hey, that's the real world of international negotiations."

You are left to wonder if this is any way to protect a natural resource. But hey, that's the way it's done. Fish get sacrificed for international relations, for jobs and sometimes for votes, as Harris points out. Describing the 1997 elections, he writes: "The Liberals had behaved as though votes were still more important than fish."

Harris is a thorough and accomplished reporter, and this book is full of inside glimpses of how things go wrong in government. He indulges in that most Canadian of frailties, national masochism, and at times seems to be saying that no other government could be as bad as Canada's.

But the reason this book is important is that the Canadian Government is typical of what is going on throughout the world.

He chooses for a point of comparison the Norwegian government, which did a very good job of managing a cod crisis and saved Norway's stocks. On fishery matters, Canadians usually compare themselves to either the Norwegians or the Icelanders, both of whom have done far better. But that is because fishing, and specifically cod, plays an enormous role in these two limited economies. The fishing minister in Iceland or Norway has the key portfolio, whereas the Canadian government has some other pressing issues of higher priority.

A fairer comparison would be with other fishing nations with large, diverse modern economies. The Common Fishing Policy of the EU, for example, is as contorted and ineffective a bureaucracy as either Ottawa – or Kafka – could imagine, and the main reason U.S. fishery management has a slightly better record is that fish stocks grow faster in warmer water.

I'm concerned that this lack of perspective, along with very little in the way of story-telling, scene-setting and character development may limit the audience for this book to readers who are already concerned about fishery issues. If it reaches only the converted, it will be unfortunate, because *Lament for an Ocean* is about one of the great global crises of our times, and deserves a wider readership than that.

Mark Kurlansky is the author of Cod: A Biography of the Fish That Changed the World.

1 What is the principal *statistical* issue involved in managing a resource like the Grand Banks cod fishery. Explain briefly.

The article EM9803 'reprinted above is used in Chapter 1 of the STAT 231 Course Materials.