

Richard C. Hoffmann

The Catch: An Environmental History of European Fisheries

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In *The Catch*, Richard Hoffmann, a professor emeritus at York University, traces the roots of the present-day acute issues in aquatic ecosystems to the exploitation and increasing commercialisation of fisheries in the late Middle Ages. Based on decades of the author's research in the environmental history of medieval European fisheries, often in collaboration with natural scientists, Hoffmann's book offers a synthesis of existing scholarship on north-western European fisheries since Late Antiquity, while his analysis is solidly grounded in the author's life-long study of archival sources on the history of fishing and environmental change. The book is an essential read for everyone interested in environmental history and management, medieval archaeology, and simply fish and aquatic animals. It not only introduces readers to the wide range of primary materials and state-of-the-art scholarship on the subject but also provides a masterful example of historical methodology informed by ecology, geography and social sciences.

The geographical scope of the book covers Western Christian Europe with a particular focus on its north-western and central parts in encyclopaedic detail, while the culturally and ecologically distinctive Balkans and continental Europe (Ukraine, Central Russia), as well as pre-Reconquista Spain are left for future scholars to explore. Such admittedly limited understanding of medieval Europe stems from Hoffmann's long-term research interest in Central European fisheries and the current state of research: Byzantine, Balkan and even Italian fish histories have not yet attracted considerable attention. Period-wise, readers might be surprised to find the story's beginning rooted in the Holocene. Although not the main subject of the book, it provides an essential and dynamic background for medieval fisheries, as the land- and waterscapes of the European subcontinent were shaped in the aftermath of the Last Glacial Period. The book is structured in nine chapters, with an extensive supplement which provides readers with even more references to primary written and archaeological sources on the history of medieval fisheries.

Chapter 1 'Natural' Aquatic Ecosystems around Late Holocene Europe' addresses the sources and historiographical approaches, as well as terminology and the uses of natural sciences for environmental history research. The following three chapters follow a classical albeit reversed triad of *consumption*, *distribution* and *production*.

The topics of fish consumption and fish availability to medieval consumers are illuminated upon in Chapter 2 'Protein, Penance, and Prestige: Medieval Demand for Fish', clearly showing that fish, besides being a lean food for the fasting time in the Christian world, have been transformed into yet another

means of showing prestige and social status by the High Middle Ages, if not earlier.

Chapter 3 'Take and Eat: Subsistence Fishing in and beyond the Early Middle Ages' explores the organisation of labour in fisheries and ownership thereof, as well as the technological advances of medieval fishing. The common medievalist's problem – the lack of primary sources for the Early Middle Ages – is most evident in this chapter, as there are relatively few written mentions of fishing, which the chapter supplements by the discussion of archaeological finds. The main argument here is that the growing demand for fish among medieval landlords led to the privatisation of waters that previously were available for communal use.

Hoffmann then proceeds to explore later common trends in European fisheries management in Chapter 4 'Master Artisans and Local Markets', including the appearance of groups of professional fishermen. The author sees the growing number of fish handlers (from fishermen as primary producers to fishmongers as retailers to consumers) as a sign that fish was becoming to be perceived 'less as something of nature and more as a cultural creation' (p. 182).

The increasing commodification of fish in the times of the high medieval population growth and climate fluctuations led to increased pressure on the aquatic ecosystems explored in Chapter 5 'Aquatic Systems under Stress, c. 1000–1350'. This chapter deals with natural and anthropogenic factors in creating and changing socio-natural sites of aquatic exploitation with a focus on carp, herring and cod as the most studied commercial species. Some of Hoffmann's conclusions are necessarily incomplete and hypothetical as he is bringing together the (incomplete) historical climate data with limited testimonies from written sources on the matter of aquatic ecosystem change, supplementing it with the studies of marine biologists performed on present-day fish schools.

In Chapter 6 'Cultural Responses to Scarcities of Fish', Hoffmann summarises three complementary responses to the changes in the aquatic ecosystems and fish stock depletion: namely, price regulations, limitation of access to fisheries, and 'public' regulation of fisheries. The latter were produced and enforced predominantly by urban communes, and covered seasonal bans on fishing for certain species according to their reproductive cycle, net mesh density and use of fishing equipment, and the minimal size of fish to catch. Although these measures might be seen as means of sustainability, the author explains, their rationale was more economically and ideologically informed than the sustained environment management of modern times. The natural and human-induced habitat alterations beyond fishermen's greed stayed for the most part unknown to the legislators.

Chapters 7 and 8 are revised and elaborated versions of Hoffmann's earlier discussion in 'Carps, Cods, Connections: New Fisheries in the Medieval European Economy and Environment', in *Animals in Human Histories: The*

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Mirror of Nature and Culture, ed. Mary J. Henninger-Voss. These chapters unfold yet another stage of fish transformation into a commodity with long-lasting ecological and social consequences. Domestication of carp and subsequent colonisation of the central and northern European landscapes by carp fishponds, the subject of Chapter 7 'Going beyond Natural Local Ecosystems: Carp Aquaculture as Ecological Revolution', is seen as a technological innovation at the service of landlords with tremendous and long-lasting ecological and social effects. One of the agents of this High medieval change, carp, benefited from its domestication, which cannot be said about peasants, who lost the remaining control over common waters and lands taken to support aquaculture. Furthermore, the decline of aquaculture in Central Europe and France by the fifteenth century led to flooding, malaria outbreaks and increasing seigniorial control over people, fishes and landscapes. Reversing Garrett Hardin's outdated 'tragedy of commons', Hoffmann calls the end result of increasing fisheries privatisation during the High and Late Middle Ages a 'tragedy of the private' (p. 247).

The 'tragedy of commons' is discussed in Chapter 8 'Going Beyond Natural Local Ecosystems, II: Over the Horizon toward Abundance and 'Tragedy'. According to the author, the development of essential market institutions (such as insurance of sea voyages) and technological advancements in shipbuilding allowed fishermen of the Late Middle Ages to push further away from the shore in search of richer fish stocks. Unlike carp, sturgeon and pike, two main commodified species of the Atlantic, cod and herring, did not qualify for noble consumption and were significantly cheaper. Therefore, hypothesises Hoffmann, the Atlantic fishermen must have been working for a larger market – and indeed, they extended their market bringing their preserved catch to distant consumers in the Mediterranean who considered it exotic. On the other side, fishing in the deep sea was a novel occupation and, hence, fishermen were lacking essential knowledge about the limitations of marine ecosystems. The boundless (as they were perceived) and unregulated 'commons' of the Atlantic Ocean and northern seas is where the 'tragedy of commons' unfolded.

Having read through the pages of economic and ecological analysis, readers might be surprised to find themselves reading a history of mentalities at the end. It is the early modern colonisation of the distant shores and the water space between them, argues Hoffmann, that underlies the present-day mentality of fishermen who think fish stocks to be infinite. The audience is left to question whether such a mentality in fact exists or existed historically. In the same vein, the concurrent claim that such destructive attitudes were spread to the other parts of the world together with European colonisation (p. 413) appears to disregard non-European histories of local colonisation(s) and nature-culture relationships.

Moreover, it might be an overstatement to associate the alleged mentality of a predominantly disadvantaged, both historically and at present, group

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of fishermen with the current fisheries crisis. If anything, all previous chapters of *The Catch* have demonstrated the involvement of multiple agents and cultural processes in transforming European aquatic and human communities throughout the Middle Ages. Furthermore, the two successful stories of sustainable environmental management outlined in the book, the tuna fisheries of the Mediterranean and the Lake Constance fisheries, emphasise the importance of social ties, communal management and the involvement of fishermen in regulation-making. The growing interest and application of traditional ecological knowledge (TEC) of the fishermen in the management of modern fisheries with positive outcomes for both fish and human communities may further suggest that the main reasons for the overexploitation of aquatic ecosystems lay in the disruption of communal ties and scientification of fisheries management brought about by the advent of the global market and the Enlightenment.

Whether readers agree or disagree with the overarching conclusion of the book, there is no denying that *The Catch* constitutes a milestone in historical studies of fisheries. The advantages of the book include but are not limited to, the encyclopaedic detail based on Hoffmann's decades of research, the variety of primary sources – whether written, visual or archaeological – and the sheer scope of the endeavour. More than that, the author makes ecological terminology and methods comprehensible for humanities students, and adaptable for further historical research. The testing of Hoffmann's main argument, as well as filling the lacunae in medieval fisheries studies, are tasks for history students to come.

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