Books Reviewed


Reviewed by Gardner Brown
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There is a common pattern for open-access fisheries, particularly for stocks that spend some time in international waters. Discovery, then entry, increases and stocks begin to and continue to decline. Less efficient harvesters are driven out. Increasing scarcity may drive up prices, inviting the search for substitutes on both the supply and demand sides. In an increasing number of instances, the search has resulted in the development of farmed fish of the same or substitute species. In Four Fish, Paul Greenberg takes us on four separate journeys adding historical, biological, and political rich specificity to the account of four open-access fisheries: salmon, tuna, bass, and cod. Fascinating facts present themselves throughout the book.

Interlarding the four chapters are substantial forays into related matter. Illustratively, as Canadian cod stocks were dropping by two billion pounds, marketers searched for a whitefish replacement to meet the demand of fast food firms. They discovered pollock, giving Greenberg the opportunity to tell us in numerous pages about the trials and tribulations of this fishery.

Industrial fishing fleets operating in the Atlantic Ocean North Sea have ravished cod stocks, aided and abetted by scientific conclusions that overfishing was not possible and further enhanced by U.S. government subsidies to harvesters amounting to $800 million in the 1970s and early 1980s, according to Greenberg. In response, most know that Georges Bank, one of the richest fisheries in the world, was closed to commercial fishing and essentially became a reserve. Most of these and geographically related cod stocks off Nova Scotia have not recovered although more than two decades have elapsed. The rebuilding target date for Georges Bank cod is set for 2026. This is unfortunate, because cod and other whitefish represent the most significant share of the Northern European’s fish diet. Fishing pressure may also have selected for small cod. To avoid mismanagement in the future, Greenberg favors management by what he calls the artisanal fishermen, those who actually are on the ground, “deeply invested in the area” and not “the distant fisheries council in New England” (made up overwhelmingly of fishermen). Here, I think he has been misdirected by Ted Ames, the former cod fisherman turned researcher, who interviewed fishermen to determine the range of cod stocks when they began fishing and wrote about the decline of cod’s prey. Ames advocates management by artisanal fishermen drawing on the experience of the Maine lobster experience. Lobsters have an excellent chance for management by their local harvesters, “lobster gangs,” because policing is exceptionally cheap, entrants are effectively monitored cheaply, the local areas are small, lobsters are “slow fish” that do not migrate, and the punishment cost of a discovered entrant is high because surface trap buoys are cheaply cut and the entrant loses his trap capital. Ames further prescribes and Greenberg recommends taking a written or oral exam to establish a captain’s proficiency about fisheries ecology before being allowed to fish. I wonder about the political feasibility of that. The phrase on the New Hampshire license plate is “Live Free or Die.” It is commonly believed that fishermen are among the most individualistic in a region known for its individualism.

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