

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Kent Blades. *Net Destruction: The Death of Atlantic Canada's Fishery*. Halifax: Nimbus Publishing, 1995. viii + 184 pp. \$17.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-55109-097-9.

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Ever since the publication of *Cod Fisheries* by Harold Innis in the 1930s, the historiography of Canadian fisheries has evolved according to these new directions prescribed by scholarship. As an example, research orientations went from the study of markets, prices, and techniques to the impact of the merchant credit system on the fishing communities of late nineteenth-century Newfoundland and the Gaspé and, more recently, on the impact of overfishing on Canadian ground fish. Contrary to what one might think, concerns about overfishing did not begin with the crisis of the 1980s and 1990s.

According to the historical research of Christopher Moore on eighteenth-century Cape Breton and myself on nineteenth-century New Brunswick, there were already concerns about the scarcity of cod along the shores of these regions. At the time of Confederation, fishermen from Caraquet expressed their worries to the federal Department of Fisheries. Their comments put an emphasis on the presence of American fishing vessels and the use of giant purse nets.

Since the federal moratorium on ground fishing, historians and sociologists have orchestrated new research on the origins of this crisis, and its impact on the population of Atlantic Canada. Kent Blades's *Net Destruction: The Death of Atlantic Canada's Fishery* follows the same path that Pol Chantraine takes in his publication, *Last Cod Fish* (Chantraine uses a journalistic approach to produce an excellent exposition of how in the modern age greed and ignorance put the prime resources of the sea at great risk).

This book is a product of a dual approach of sociology and biology. Being trained in both fields, Kent Blades is able to master both methodologies and terminologies. Divided into ten chapters, this study focuses on all com-

ponents of the ground fishing industry and basically revolves around the main factors causing the dramatic decline of these natural resources. After offering a brief, yet well-structured, history of ground fishing, Blades develops his argumentation around three sectors.

As already mentioned, the author's dual training allows him to simplify the vocabulary and methodology of biology and sociology. As a matter of fact, the main goal of the book is to reach and inform those suffering the most from the crisis, that is, those involved directly in the harvesting and processing of fish. That explains the constant effort of the author to make scientific data more comprehensible. But even if Blades does not target the scholarly community, it is undeniable that university professors and researchers will gain much by examining this book. The arguments are well written and supported by a solid bibliography.

The first series of arguments revolves around a description of the fish habitat and the vulnerability of the food chain versus fishing operations. The second section aims at identifying those responsible for the collapse of the fish stock: the federal government, the large corporations, scientists, and the fishermen themselves. Finally, the author tries to anticipate the future of the fish industry during the administration of Brian Tobin, former Canadian Minister of Fisheries. Tobin made it clear that from now on, both the government and the participants in the fisheries would have to give priority to the well-being of the ecosystem, even to the extent of losing more jobs in the industry.

The goals pursued by Blades are similar to those of other researchers and scholars since the beginning of the crisis. They all wish to identify those responsible for the actions, or lack of them, that led to the sad situation that

now prevails. According to Blades, there are certain factors associated with the roles played by the actors cited above—the environmental influence, the increase of the seal population, the destructive fishing methods and illegal practices at sea. But the major factor lies in the following question: who controls the fisheries, and how did the ambitions of those controlling agents create a chain of managerial disasters leading to their closing?

To illustrate historically the path followed by hundreds of fishing communities throughout Atlantic Canada in the context of the crisis, the author uses the case of Clark's Harbour in Nova Scotia. Since the beginning of the settlement, both fishermen and entrepreneurs made continued efforts to adapt to the technological evolution and changing market demands—from the time of the sailing boat and the hand line, to the transition to gas engines, and finally to the famous trawlers. The positive evolution of the industry and the village was maintained until 1989. At that time, the main company in the area, Sable Fish Packers, had to scale down its operations. Like many other fishing villages in the Atlantic, Clark's Harbour became increasingly dependent on the lobster industry and federal government special assistance programs.

The components of those programs are now well known to people in the rural areas of our region: temporary financial support, and retraining for access to a more professional fishing industry, or to work outside the fisheries. The older workers can also choose an early retirement package. Consequences of this situation are similar to the ones earlier in the twentieth century: a massive exodus of younger people toward central and western Canada. Both provincials and federal governments have acknowledged their incapacity to create new jobs for those excluded from the fisheries.

Even with such a globally pessimistic picture, Blades concludes on a positive note. He indicates that forces of

nature, combined with government measures, could stop the decline of the stocks. Scientists have recently located small groups of young cod off Newfoundland. Also, fishermen off the south shore of Nova Scotia have noticed that deep sea species seem to have recovered to 1987 levels. There is therefore a slim hope if very strict conservation measures are maintained.

In terms of general appreciation, there is no doubt that those who are concerned by the crisis in deep sea fishing will have to look closely into this book. If the causes of the decline mentioned are not necessarily new, they are nevertheless simplified and better presented than they are in government or very specialized scholarly research. Therefore, in my opinion, Blades has attained his goal, which is to present a more accessible version of the problem to the general public. With regard to historians, this book will certainly help them to understand and explain better the origin of the present devastating crisis, which began twenty years ago. On the other hand, the book does not give solid indications of stock decline beyond the twentieth century. Historians will have to look closer at conventional sources to understand that signs of decline already existed in the mid-eighteenth century.

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