

Kurlansky, Mark - *The Last Fish Tale: The Fate of the Atlantic and Survival in Gloucester, America's Oldest Fishing Port and Most Original Town*

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Mark Kurlansky discussed the importance of cod and the impact it had on the small town of Gloucester. His story of Gloucester made me realize that if this small town is so affected by this issue of overfishing, what does this look like everywhere else? The part of his book that stuck with me is the fact that there seems to be no solution to stop this problem of overfishing. Kurlansky mentioned many different solutions, all of which had problems. For example, creating quotas; this caused fish that were caught to be thrown overboard, most of which were dead. Another solution was to stop bottom dragging in order to catch fish which resulted in many fishermen protesting as most of these fishermen used this technique. He also suggested to switch to another species of fish such as dogfish or hagfish, but unlike cod, these fishes grow very slowly, meaning they reproduce at a later age, resulting in their populations being overfished very quickly. This left an impression on me because if we cannot find a solution to this problem, we will eventually lose cod populations which are a key organism to promote biodiversity of other marine species as well as to promote a strong economy. Something that gave me hope was a study performed by fourteen scientists titled "Impacts of Biodiversity Loss on Ocean Ecosystem Services" which predicted that "all commercial fish stocks will collapse by the year 2048. However, scientists also found that it was not too late and recovery was still possible" (169-170). This left me wondering how we can save these populations if we are not able to come up with a long-term solution.

Because of this issue, I think the audience of this book is the general public, especially focusing on fisheries. He discusses ways in which fisheries can help to regulate the amount of

fish being overfished. For example, he discussed the possibility of creating exclusive fishing zones to allow for some areas to be protected so fish can be given an opportunity to grow and reproduce. This is important as well for the general public because one of the ways to help stop this problem is through education. By mentioning the devastating effects overfishing has on the environment, this can give the audience a new perspective on this problem. I didn't realize how bad this problem had gotten and it makes me want to do something about it and I think this is one of the reasons why he wrote this book. Even being from Wisconsin (away from the ocean) I feel like I can help. For example, choosing to eat other fish rather than cod or even switching from fish to another meat source.

I think this book was very well written because it started from introducing the town of Gloucester and ended on the large issue of overfishing. This allowed me to really understand how this issue came about and gave more of a personal feel to the book. His use of storytelling helped me to follow along with what was happening and allowed me to fall in love with Gloucester. In addition, the prologue at the beginning on pole walking really caught my attention and made me want to keep reading. However, I was also confused as to why he chose to include this in his book. I felt like it didn't relate to his overall topic and it left me wanting more and wondering how it would connect later in the novel. That being said, his ideas were supported by his use of well known organizations such as the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) which helps build his credibility and makes the book more accurate. In addition, his use of real life sources such as the *Science* magazine shows that the events that he is referring to happened in real life and it makes this book for more credible.

I really enjoyed reading this book because I've heard so much about overfishing and was recommended to read the book *COD: A Biography of the Fish that Changed the World*. I

enjoyed learning about Gloucester because it brought a cultural element into it. For example, a Gloucester story is “a story of miserable irony in which things are shown in their worst light, a story with a sad ending” (3). There were stories like these that really opened my eyes to the dangers of fishing. For example, one of the most famous Gloucester stories was about how three fishermen got lost in a storm and couldn’t make it back to the main ship. Two of the men froze to death while the third did make it to land but lost many fingers and toes. The story ends with a bar being created in remembrance of this story. I enjoyed reading stories like these, but this one in particular reminded me of whaling and the dangers out at sea.

Cod fishing is a lot like whaling in the sense of being a sailor or fishmen and the effects on each organism. On board the vessel, we learned that sailors would eat hard tack to keep them occupied and full, whereas on cod ships they would eat “hard sea biscuits, soaked for softening before eating” (36). They also avoided eating cod because it was an expensive fish, just like whalers didn’t consume whale meat. In addition, both whaling and cod fishing has a negative effect on the fishes’ populations. The right whale’s populations decreased to a total of 450 individuals as a result of whaling, where the population of cod is expected to be gone by 2048. Looking to now, the right whale population is continuing to decline, and this could mean bad things for the cod population. Whaling began to decline in the 19th century, and we are not seeing an increase in their populations, even today. If this is the case, the cod populations may never recover as well, which will further complicate and negatively impact the food web as well as our economy.

Whaling was very dangerous, and a lot of men died at sea, especially when they caught a whale. I didn’t realize that fishermen also experienced these dangers and it helps to see why fishermen get so angry when rules and regulations are being placed upon them. For example, as a

whaler, you would leave as a boy and come back a man. You would come back full of blood and oil and walk around proud to be able to provide for the community. You would grow as a sailor and learn the ways of whaling. Fisherman also had to endure dangerous conditions and felt rewarded for their work: “from the fishermen’s point of view they work a hard and dangerous job, risking their lives to feed society” (156).

In order to make cod fishing safer, we discussed how it was important to be fast: go out, collect your fish, and come back in as little time as possible. Even using a fast ship was beneficial. A solution to this was discussed in the book: schooners. Schooners were a type of boat that was developed for fast travel: “the schooner was built for speed. The ratio that creates speed is the greatest possible amount of square feet of sail, driving the fewest possible cubic feet of hull space through the water” (39). They used these ships to quickly capture fish and bring them into the market. As a result of these fast ships, there was a market for fresh fish that developed in the Banks because they could bring back fresh cod with the use of these ships. The problem with these ships is that they would be known to sink very quickly and there are many stories of people who died or never returned home from fishing; “several times, more than a hundred Gloucester fishermen were lost on Georges Bank in a single storm. Twice, Gloucester lost more than a third of its fleet in one night” (43).

In addition, the book talked about how cod was preserved using salt. We learned in class how lightly salting cod was a better way to preserve it than overly salting it. I didn’t realize that sea salt was used to salt these fish. The book talked about how they take water from the sea and evaporate it to get the salt, which they let dry out. Since I am used to always having salt around, I didn’t even think about how they collect the salt. We also discussed how Portuguese was a large part of the Gloucester population and the book mentioned that as well. Because of

the large presence of Portuguese people, they had a large impact in the community and had many traditions. Because Gloucester is also a large fish community, this was important in the Portuguese culture. For example, the book discussed many recipes made with cod and how it was incorporated into the community: “a traditional meal always had one salt cod dish, usually the appetizer” (69). This shows how important fishing was to this community to be able to integrate it into a traditional Portuguese meal, which you wouldn’t find anywhere else. Even today, Portuguese culture can still be found in Gloucester such as Portuguese food being served in local restaurants.

All in all, I thought it was crazy how cod used to be very plentiful in this community and how there were stories of being able to walk on water or be able to hand fish or that it was hard to boat through the waters because of the amount of cod. In addition, there weren’t a lot of jobs besides cod fishing and women weren’t allowed to leave the community. Looking at today, there are many changes to the economy because people are starting to move away, and they are not as big as a fishing town as they once were. The cod is not as plentiful as it once was, as it has been overfished. This this makes me realize how much of an impact this could have on the rest of the world. The one small town who was known as the largest fishing community has collapsed, makes me wonder the negative effects this will start to have everywhere else. I thought it was crazy how this small town was able to overcome so many obstacles. For example, the death of the many fisherman from schooners, yet that didn’t stop them from fishing. One anonymous reporter stated “the history of the Gloucester fisheries has been written in tears” when talking about the death of these sailors, but I think it can also be applied to what it has become today and the negative impacts of the cod fish.