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Electronic Green Journal

Title

Abundance to Scarcity: A History of U.S. Marine Fisheries Policy

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/9r15b50p>

Journal

Electronic Green Journal, 1(17)

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Publication Date

2002

DOI

10.5070/G311710496

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Review: From Abundance to Scarcity: A History of U.S. Marine Fisheries Policy

By Michael L. Weber

Reviewed by [Ryder W. Miller](#)
San Francisco, California, USA

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Michael L. Weber. *From Abundance to Scarcity: A History of U.S. Marine Fisheries Policy*. Washington, DC: Island Press, 2001. 245 pp. ISBN 1-55963-706-4. US\$27.50. Acid free recycled paper.

When the war came to Monterey and to Cannery Row everybody fought it more or less, in one way or another. When hostilities ceased everyone had his wounds. The canneries themselves fought the war by getting the limit taken off fish and catching them all. It was done for patriotic reasons, but that didn't bring the fish back. As with the oysters in Alice, "They'd eaten every one." It was the same noble impulse that stripped the forests of the West and right now is pumping water out of California's earth faster than it can rain back in. When the desert comes, people will be sad; just as Cannery Row was sad when all the pilchards were caught and canned and eaten. The pearl-gray canneries of corrugated iron were silent and a pacing watchman was their only life. The street that once roared with trucks was quiet and empty. -John Steinbeck, *Sweet Thursday* (1954)

Believing the sea could feed the world, marine scientists past the midpoint of the 20th century estimated that the sea would produce from 400 to 500 metric tons of seafood per year. Nations competed for this abundance, but only 90 metric tons of marine lives per year were caught. Marine scientists hired by the government later discovered that it was not the fishing methods that were the cause of the discrepancy between catches and estimated yield, but the science that overestimated what was available. Adding to the decline in estimated sustainable yield was the decline in the fish populations caused by the overexploitation of the marine resources. In broad strokes, Michael L. Weber in *From Abundance to Scarcity* chronicles how the U.S. government caused, and responded to, the lessening abundance of the sea.

Weber brings the behind-the-scenes debates to life, detailing the actions and thinking of the regulatory players involved. Weber tells the inside story of the regulatory agencies adapting to the times and the growing ecological damage caused by over fishing. The monkfish swims through this bittersweet tale and the marine regulatory laws line up and grow with the times as the environmentalist succeed in getting their arguments across.

The most important pieces of legislation chronicled are the following:

Magnuson-Stevens Management Act (1976) that gave American fisherman control over the coastal water out to 200 miles. Before its passage foreign fisherman could use these waters without restrictions, but the act limited their access and put them under a management regime, creating a vacuum that American fisherman would later fill. The Magnuson-Stevens Management Act became a living legislation with amendments later added and revised.

The Marine Mammal Protection Act (1972) was the result of efforts by marine conservationists to protect charismatic megafauna like whales, and dolphins. Years later these new conservation values would be adapted to protect marine turtles and less charismatic marine bycatch.

The Sustainable Fisheries Act (1996), which added amendments to the Magnuson-Stevens Act, closed loopholes that allowed fisherman to fish unsustainably, reduced bycatch and reduced the fishing fleets.

As Weber chronicles, the general regulatory trend was too little too late, but the issues were complicated. The burden of proof eventually fell on the fisherman to show that they were not causing damage. Marine managers grew concerned over the preservation of marine habitats rather than solely the protection of marine populations. Not chronicled, maybe because enough of them do not exist, are people who decide not to eat fish for moral or health reasons? Unlike domestic food sources (cows and chickens) whose very existence in such abundance depends upon their being a food source, fish are wild and part of the natural environment. Weber shows how the salmon are on their way to domestication with fish being planted in the rivers to be later caught for the dinner table. Recent conservation efforts not covered in the work had as their goal public sustainable fisheries consumption with lists of good and bad fish to eat.

Arranged by themes and not always chronologically, the book may present difficulties for the reader who is looking for a historical story. But the history itself went in jumps and spurts with different classifications of marine life having different regulatory and conservation histories. Marine bycatch were not afforded the same protection as the charismatic megafauna like the turtle, whale, or dolphin. But there is an introduction, chapter summaries, and a conclusion that help the reader follow the bittersweet history. Though at times repetitive, and probably necessarily so, most of the individual chapters can stand on their own.

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and science reporter who has been published in *Sierra Magazine*, *California Coast & Ocean*, *California Wild*, and *Hydrosphere*.