



ARTS

Edited by Stephen Bevis



Fishy business points to a loss of diversity in life

CHRISTOPHER BANTICK

Mark Kurlansky is a writer on a mission. This is to encourage us to be aware of the state of the oceans. His recent books, *Cod: The Biography of a Fish That Changed the World* and *The Big Oyster*, have been international bestsellers. Besides being written in an involving way, they have served as prompts for us to ask why fish stocks have declined. Is it environment? Partly. Is it overfishing? Demonstrably so.

Kurlansky's new book, *The Last Fish Tale: The Fate of the Atlantic and Our Disappearing Fisheries*, is a lament. It sets out to show just what happens to fishing communities when the reason for their existence, fish, is depleted. Much of the book focuses on Gloucester, near Cape Ann, Massachusetts. But Kurlansky also looks to the Atlantic beyond Gloucester and Newfoundland.

At one point in the book, Kurlansky makes mention that the cod, the great prize of the ocean, have not returned to Newfoundland. Is this a sign of things to come in terms of international fisheries? "What is

really frightening about the cod not returning to the Grand Banks is that no one is exactly sure. It underscores how much we don't know."

Given that Australia, because of its vast coastline and fishing grounds, is under pressure from illegal fishing, is there a lesson in Kurlansky's book for WA coastal communities? Or is the Atlantic a special case?

"The reason I write about the Atlantic, aside from it being the ocean I have lived on most of my life, is that it has the oldest tradition of large-scale abusive commercial fishing. It is at an even larger scale and is even more abusive in other places but this is an exhausted sea with all the history and all the lessons to be learnt. The same things are happening everywhere else but if those people look at the Atlantic, they might want to stop."

Often the most remote fishing villages dotting the world's coasts are in picturesque locations as well. This inevitably means some impact of tourism. Annie Proulx's *The Shipping News*, comes to mind. Where Kurlansky looks at the issue of tourism is

through the doorway of how the search for new tourist experiences may result in long-term damage.

"There are two leading dangers to tourism and also some lesser ones. First, because there is more money in tourism it tends to make everything from mooring fees to real estate too expensive for the commercial fishing community and drives them out. Another big problem is that the people in the tourism sector fear any discussion of real problems is bad for business. So business creates a pressure not to discuss environmental and social problems and, therefore, not to address these concerns."

Clearly, when the fish are gone or at least depleted, then there are consequences on the fishing communities. But what causes the depletion of fish stocks? Is it due to their management and exploitation or are climate change and global warming also having an impact?

"There are many areas of the world, Newfoundland would be an example, where there is no longer abusive fishing and yet the fish stocks are not rebuilding as



they should be. So clearly, there are other factors involved such as global warming and pollution. These are subjects that are not studied nearly enough," he says.

While global warming and climate change are a real concern Kurlansky says that there is also the matter of the type of fishing.

"Personally, I think restrictions in fishing gear are not pursued nearly enough. I have studied the history of stern net trawling in the North Atlantic since it began in the North Sea in the 1880s. It is clear to me that where it has gone, destruction has followed. If financing were made available to get fishermen away from this type of fishing, I think it would be found that fish stocks could more successfully be maintained with

less regulation.

"The issue of whether or not we have reached the point of no return on fish stocks has been studied extensively and most scientists agree that it can be reversed if we take the right actions now."

There is, Kurlansky says, a risk that with the loss of fish stocks, then elements of fish-based culture may also go.

"As fishing ports vanish, and become tourism centres instead, we are losing a way of life that is fundamental to the culture of seagoing nations. Considering the number of family firms that collapse every year, it is the disappearance of languages being one of the things going on in the world I am deeply concerned

about. This is a sign of the loss of diversity in our civilisation.

Diversity is essential for survival in society, the same way that it is in biology."

While Kurlansky's focus is the Atlantic, he says that notwithstanding significant levels of illegal fishing, Australia is better placed than most nations.

"Australia has the advantage of fishing in waters where abusive fishing has a less lengthy history, given the amount of fishing abuse going on. I wouldn't count on that to save you for too long."

The Last Fish Tale, by Mark Kurlansky. Jonathan Cape. \$34.95. Mark Kurlansky will be a guest at the 2009 Perth Writers Festival. For more details visit perthfestival.com.au.



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