

A biography of the fish that changed the world

[Literature](#), [Autobiography](#)



I chose the book *Cod: A Biography of the Fish That Changed the World*. As the title suggests, and the author, Mark Kurlansky, explores, a simple fish, more specifically, cod, has an importance that has been proven throughout history. The prologue is set in Petty Harbour, a town in Newfoundland and tells a story of three experienced fishermen, Sam, Leonard, and Bernard.

They are participating in the Sentinel Fishery which was an attempt to help scientists and fishermen work together to measure the supply of cod. Their boat was to catch as many cod as they could and measure and tag them. A second boat was to catch exactly 100 cod and open them to identify their age and sex. For three men who fishing was their life hobby, you would think this would be an enjoyable job, but in actuality, it was a result of the Canadian government shutting down groundfishing in order to control fishing operations as to preserve the quantity and life of the cod.

The book unfolds in three parts and each part has multiple chapters. Part One, entitled *A Fish Tale*, begins by describing the Vikings as the first known fishermen of cod. The Vikings ability to travel long distances and discover new places was due to their skill in air drying the cod. This form of curing fish preserved the cod and allowed them a food source that did not spoil quickly.

Furthermore, the Basques, who were a mysterious group, were able to maintain their independence because they had a strong economy which was a result of adding salting to the airing process as a means to preserve the cod. This allowed them to travel long distances, monopolize on catching cod on their secret waters and in addition, were able to heavily trade cod. This section also talks about different areas arguing over access to different

waters, the attempt to regulate trade and explorers claiming land. Cod was the common item that resulted in the hostility among these topics.

The book goes into great detail of how North America was explored by multiple Europeans. The rise and fall of power by the French, the English and the Germans are discussed, as well as slavery, wars, trade, and taxation. All of this important history is linked to the codfish. The catching, the selling, the trading, and the monopolizing of waters all contributed to the development of the colonies, and because of this fish, the book suggests cod was the fish that changed the world.

This section also covers details about the actual fish including how cod live, how they reproduce, and what they eat. Cod are not strong, nor fast and swim with their mouth open. Consequently, they can be caught without bait because they swallow anything that fits in their mouth, including jiggers and they don't put up a fight with the fisherman. They are great sources of protein, especially when dried, and there is no waste on the fish. There are ten families of cod and include over 200 species.

The Atlantic cod is the most popular and produces the highest financial return as well as the greatest status amongst fishermen. Part Two, Limits, focuses on two subjects. First, it discusses the dangers of fishing for cod. It elaborates on the terrible conditions including cold temperatures, fog, currents, lack of sleep and equipment injuries. It is said that more fishermen have been lost at sea than men died in the wars.

These deaths are a result of boats getting lost at sea, sinking, and men falling or being swept off the boats. These fishermen take the risk because fishing means economic survival. Secondly, this section of the book presents the conflicting theories of biologists between overfishing and the natural resource of cod being invincible. Those fearing the depletion of cod suggest it is because of better techniques (longlining and gillnetting), increasing technology (chronometer, telegraph, and freezing) and modernization of boats (engine and steam-powered and motor ships) and equipment (sonar and spotter aircraft).

As a result, nations began to claim their coastal waters which started at three miles and by 1975, after three cod wars, was expanded to 200-mile limits. Part Three, The Last Hunters, outlines quotas and moratoriums implemented in the later history in order to seek the prevention of cod depletion. As a result, fishermen and fishing communities paid the price. One aspect of Canada's moratorium developed a monitoring program which brings the book full circle to the prologue where Sam and his friends were working as part of the Sentinel Fishery.

From governments to fishermen and all the scientists and councils in between, everyone has their own opinion on whether or not the cod will replenish themselves to a number that will allow economic gains. The reality is that costs were greater than revenue and as a result, overfishing became a complex global problem that forced fishermen to find other jobs. As a result, fishing communities drastically changed.

One of the book's arguments is that of nature being infinitely endless versus the concept of overfishing depleting the cod stock. The topic of conservation, or lack of, can be paralleled to these conflicting concepts. As outlined in this assignment, conservation is defined as the management of a resource or system to sustain its productivity over time. In this case, I will address the conservation of cod and how the supply was managed, or mismanaged, throughout history up until the time this book was first published in 1997. As the book's title simply states, cod has changed the world.

More complexly, it allowed for a food source and financial stability throughout most of history. I would conclude that the majority of the 1800s, conservation wasn't considered necessary. The prominent philosopher, Thomas Henry Huxley, was on multiple fishing commissions, spoke internationally, and persuaded government bodies that it was not possible to overfish for cod. Despite what fishermen had thought, Huxley proclaimed that cod will always reproduce at a faster rate than caught.

It wasn't until after his death that the British government admitted that overfishing was indeed occurring. This was in 1902 and was the first the book mentions the concern, which remained a focus throughout the 1900s and the rest of the book. It wasn't until 1949 that the International Commission for the Northwest Atlantic Fisheries was organized to begin addressing ways to regulate the growing fishing industry.

This is the first conservation was considered on a global level. Several examples of conservation unfolded throughout the next 50 years. Setting limits and waters were not always agreed upon throughout various nations,

but all began to recognize the problem. The Magnuson Fisheries Conservation and Management Act in 1976 developed the 200-mile conservation zone. The goal was to eliminate foreign fishing, reduce overfishing, and allow the cod stock to replenish.

The European Union Common Fishing Policy was put in place in the 1970s as well. The policy outlined very specific quotas per boat, species, area and time frame. It was in 1992, that the Canadian government established a moratorium that shut down groundfishing along the east coast. One component of the moratorium was the development of Newfoundland's Sentinel Fishery which I referenced earlier. These types of programs were implemented to monitor the cod stock.

Here in the US in 1994, the National Marine Fishery Services reacted to their findings that the cod stock was rapidly declining. Further conservation measures were seen in the restricted number of days that vessels were allowed to groundfish. The original 139-day restriction was then lowered to 88 days within two years based on the fact that numbers continued to decline. Furthermore, the monitoring systems were an attempt to sustain the cod for future generations.

In this particular case, I feel conservation and sustainability go hand and hand. In an attempt to sustain the cod, the controversial idea of fish farming is discussed. Fish farming is when cod are enclosed in an area and fed to fatten them up. Maybe, in theory, this seems to be a solution, but scientists suggest that farming comes with consequences. Because of how the cod are

farmed, they are often unable to adapt when they are released inshore for spawning.

Although conservation wasn't a concern in the first half of the book, the second half discussed limits as a means for conservation. Examples of limiting areas of fishing, limiting numbers of fish caught and limiting the number of days allowed to fish were evident but also challenged as maybe a little too late forthcoming.

The second topic I would like to discuss is that of a hazard. As outlined in this assignment, a hazard is defined as an object, condition, or process that threatens individuals and society in terms of production or reproduction. I would like to suggest that the process of overfishing is a hazard that this book unfolds throughout history. Overfishing is simply when cod are caught at a faster rate than they can naturally reproduce.

The author suggests that man is part of the natural world and the two can't separate themselves, and in this case, the activity of overfishing is driven by man. Cod provided a source of protein and a financial stability to many nations. As populations increased, the demand for cod increased, and consequently, the industry became competitive in nature. Because of this, fishing for the Atlantic cod became commercialized, and although nations modernized at different speeds, the goal for all was to catch more.

As early as 1815, the French used the technique of longlining. Although it was expensive because of the amount of bait that was used, it was the first advancement from handlining and allowed for numerous fish to be caught at

once. From there, bottom dragging became popular and although it was an effective method of catching a lot of cod at once, it was also damaging to other fish that got caught in the net. In addition to improved techniques, curing methods advanced and freezing methods were developed.

Technology advancements included the chronometer and telegraph which both improved navigation, and sonars and spotter aircraft aided in spotting cod schools. Fishing boats advanced from oars and sails to steam-powered to motorships. All of these advancements aided in the overfishing and consequently became a hazard. Scientists argue that you can't predict nature and there is no way to tell if and when, as well as, how long it will take to replenish the cod stock. For this reason, I suggest overfishing to be a hazard.

The depletion of cod has ramifications on today's society. Fishing communities have suffered as fishermen have been displaced and forced to find other work, and the economy of these towns do not have the same stability as they once did. In addition, cod was a nutritional food source and my guess is that it will become an expensive delicacy. Cod was a constant thread throughout history, and its importance is indisputable.

This book provided me with knowledge of the species, as well as how this simple fish connected nations across the northwest region. Conservation attempts were outlined after the concept of overfishing was identified as a concern. The hazard of man overfishing was proven as history unfolded and technological advancements developed. In addition to all the great detail this

book provided about cod, the fish that changed the world, the tales, recipes, and pictures brought life to the subject.