# STORIES OF FISH AND PEOPLE:

## *Oral Tradition and the Environmental Crisis*

BY MICHAEL MARKER

*Making Salmon:*
*An Environmental History of the Northwest Fisheries Crisis*
Joseph E. Taylor III
Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1999.
421 pp. Illus., maps. US$34.95 cloth.

*To Fish in Common:*
*The Ethnohistory of Lummi Indian Salmon Fishing*
Daniel L. Boxberger
Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000 (orig. 1989).
212 pp. Illus., maps. US$17.95 paper.

*Messages from Frank's Landing:*
*A Story of Salmon, Treaties, and the Indian Way*
Charles Wilkinson
Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000.
118 pp. Illus., maps. cloth. US$22.50 cloth.

*Fishing Places, Fishing People:*
*Traditions and Issues in Canadian Small-Scale Fisheries*
Dianne Newell and Rosemary E. Ommer, editors
Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999.
374 pp. Illus., maps. $24.95 paper.

*The Last Great Sea: A Voyage through the*
*Human and Natural History of the North Pacific Ocean*
Terry Glavin
Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre, 2000. 244 pp. $34.95 cloth.

The first and greatest American revolution, which has never been superseded, was the coming of people who did *not* look upon the land as a homeland.

Wendel Berry

THE CENTERPIECE of environ mental discussions in British Columbia and Washington State is the salmon fishery. The question of what to do about the salmon crisis is usually followed by histories of who is to blame for the problem, who the "legitimate stakeholders" are, and how the various categories of needs are to be balanced. But, fish are more than just fish. While the five books discussed here are ostensibly about fish and fishing, they are really *more* about Indian-white relations. In examining these works, we must begin to view the fish not simply as an environmental issue, but as a central category of meaning that has defined the rudimentary disjunctures between Indian and white views of resources, relationships, and responsibilities to the land. Tere is a need to place *both* Indian and white narratives about fishing on the ethnohistorical landscape.

The consideration that tribal peoples had for the fish was so vital to their existence and to their identity that it was said, both a century ago and more recently, the disappearance of the fish would mean the disappearance of the people. Hence, the 1855 Point Elliot treaty displaced Puget Sound Indians with regard to land, but not with regard to the fish which they were to share "in common" with the white settlers. In 1974, after nearly a century of deteriorating Indian access, "in common" was articulated by federal judge George Boldt to mean fifty per cent of the available catch. The anti-Indian backlash of this era, referred to as the fishing wars, persists in the deeply felt antagonisms and suspicions of Indian and non-Indian communities in the region. The Boldt decision is still a foregrounded part of discussions by First Nations on both sides of the border, and it serves to launch stories about how the old people conducted their lives and identity around the fish in a way that was both mythic and practical. Stories about the "pre-Boldt days" are also ways of telling about the whiteman and a cultural pattern of detached industrial exploitation and eventual destruction.

The *narratives* about both humans and fish are what is important here. That is, the stories about how people and cultures conducted themselves help us move beyond the immobilizing complex chronologies of over-fishing, development, pollution, population, logging, and dams. Moreover, as William Cronon explains, "the principal difference between a chronicle and a narrative is that a good story makes us *care* about its subject in a way that a chronicle does not."[2] Further to the point, Cronon urges "upon environmental historians the task of telling not just stories about nature, but stories about stories about nature."[3]

Joseph E. Taylor III, in *Making Salmon: An Environmental History of*

[1] Wendel Berry, *The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture* (New York: Avon Books, 1978) 4.

[2] William Cronon, "A Place for Stories: Nature, History, and Narrative," *Journal of American History* 78, 4 (March, 1992), 1374.

[3] Cronon, "A Place for Stories," 1375.

*the Northwest Fisheries Crisis*, explores the ways that oral tradition linked humans and nature together, validating the cosmology and ecology that were inseparable. Storytelling customs not only explicated rituals and ceremonies to be performed, they also indicated that catastrophes could occur when the salmon, or other animals, were offended. Taylor shows how the stories condensed an intricate array of relationships and performances which were sublimely functional in not only sustaining the fishery, but in actually increasing its output. He concludes that as many salmon were taken and consumed in the Columbia river system during pre-contact times as during the height of the industrial fishery: "Indians put considerable pressure on salmon runs yet avoided permanent harm"(23). Consumption was moderated by oral tradition and ritual: "Restraint flowed from the concepts and practices of Oregon country Indians, who filled their world with spirits that demanded respect. The way they understood this relationship resulted in a series of activities dedicated to propitiating salmon" (27).

Taylor proceeds to discuss the role of narrative in tribal life: "What myths expressed in words, ceremonies expressed in deed; they were interrelated halves of a coherent ideology"(32). He contrasts this custom with the perspective from the white settler side explaining that "Oregonians knew that dams harmed salmon, but most regarded them as engines of economic progress that were too important to stop" (175). He discusses the way "industry and government used science to blunt criticism"(176). He charts the development of hatcheries and fish farming as a failed panacea to the collision of industrial development and salmon sustainability.

Taylor's research is exhaustive (his endnotes take up a third of the book, including an impressive bibliographic essay) and he presents a broad sweep of a history that is made both cultural and environmental. It becomes a book about the people of Oregon filled with narratives which interpret the meaning of the place and the salmon. However, the Native people fade out of an early, rich discourse on culture and re-emerge toward the end of the book as two-dimensional players in the political and economic terrain. Absent is a conversation on the more recent cultural history and the present conditions of reservation economic and community life. The effect is to bifurcate the history of Indian-white relations into a 19th century image of culturally planted beliefs, values, and symbols contrasted with a 20th century emphasis on economics and politics. We seem to get lessons in anthropology in the first half of the book shifting to a discussion of biological science and competing market forces in the second half.

While Taylor is properly reproachful of "new age types" who have re-invented the first-salmon ceremony making it an amalgam of "consumerism and ceremony" (239), he does not acknowledge a legitimate contemporary Native perspective on the salmon crisis. Once again, the Indians all seem to be in the past and their stories and approach to life are irrelevant to a present which, he tells us, is exceedingly complex and defies "simple stories." He has missed the point of his own early discussion about oral tradition and its rich possibilities. The reason the old people *told* the stories is because the reality of salmon ecology was so intricate that it defied explanation in any other way. The story offers a route which travels

through complexity and arrives at the far side. Such stories about salmon were and still are fundamentally moral narratives that present images of proper conduct and the consequences of transgression.

Imagining the contemporary significance of First Nations' relational knowledge could help environmental historians transcend the lackluster trope of "restoring a balance between the interests of humans and of salmon" (257). David Orr concludes that "history offers little help, since there is no example of a society that was or is both technologically dynamic and environmentally sustainable."[4] While it could be argued that Aboriginal people were far from technologically static, Orr's point is that there is no way to balance the appetites of a post-industrial society with the intricacies of an ecosystem. The authors of the book *Uncommon Controversy*, published in 1970 by the American Friends Service Committee, viewed Indian fishing rights as a moral problem not predicated on *balance*, but on recognition of "some hard facts of life." They were hopeful that a study of Aboriginal fishing might create a broader, transformative discourse leading to an "Indian-like attitude toward nature."[5]

Narratives illuminate the divide between white and Indian interpretations of fish and the social spaces of fishing. Dan Boxberger's revised *To Fish in Common: The Ethnohistory of Lummi Indian Salmon Fishing* stands alone in giving us an ethnohistory of a Puget Sound tribe's recent history of economic and political struggles. Noting the influence of Richard White's study of Choctaws, Pawnees, and Navajos,[6] Boxberger utilizes dependency theory to explain the persistent underdevelopment of the Lummi fishery and community. Technological and economic forces, controlled by whites, resulted in Lummi impoverishment and marginalization. Chris Friday's foreword locates the work thematically in the Pacific region and includes a commentary on turns in historical studies of Indians since the 1989 publication. The emphasis of such ethnohistories has recently shifted to discourse analysis and how "people's 'stories' are negotiated in the context of differential positions of power" (xi). A highlight of this new paperback version is Boxberger's self-reflective preface that gives us a glance at his own relationships to the Lummi community. One wishes for this kind of *voice* throughout the book, but beyond the preface we remain outside the deeper story. This is not to cast criticism at the book, it is only to note that while this research was written as an ethnohistory of a fishing tribe's political economy, this new preface implies that the stories about *this* story may be at least as compelling and valuable as the text presented. Boxberger gives us an important look at local and tribal response to federal and state policy, but there are intricate corners of conversation that we don't get access to about fishing, culture, families, and relations across the cultural barricades.

[4] David Orr, *Ecological Literacy: Education and the Transition to a Postmodern World* (Albany: SUNY press, 1992), 21.

[5] American Friends Service Committee, *Uncommon Controversy: Fishing Rights of the Muckleshoot, Puyallup, and Nisqually Indians* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1970), xxx.

[6] Richard White, *The Roots of Dependency: Subsistence, Environment, and Social Change among the Choctaws, Pawnees, and Navahos* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1983).

In *Messages from Frank's Landing: A Story of Salmon, Treaties, and the Indian Way*, law professor Charles Wilkinson gives us a scrapbook view of Nisqually activist Billy Frank and the fishing rights controversies of the 1960s and 1970s. Wilkinson alternately interviews Frank and then tells the legal history leading up to the Boldt decision. The book has abundant black and white photographs. These show the Frank family and the Nisqually tribe pitted against powerful economic interests guarded by a state police force whose violent enforcement tactics were occasionally captured by the camera. While Wilkinson's "up close and personal" approach to the topic of salmon and Indian-white relations gives voice and presence to tribal people as a historic and contemporary actuality, one longs for a deeper analysis of history and hidden cultural/political forces. Billy Frank's direct and unassuming way of speaking tells of surreal and bizarre ironies for modern tribal peoples. One such incident involved the US army's Fort Lewis which was firing artillery shells across the Nisqually reservation in the 1970s: "You could hear those shells whistle on their way. You never could be sure exactly where the hell they would land. Once one landed right next to one of our fireworks stands and a big goddam fire broke out."(84) But, Billy Frank prefers the army over more toxic neighbors: "Who do you want there – the army, or a bunch of subdivisions?" (81) Further, he explains that, "a general's mission is to train troops. He makes some noise. Sometimes he shakes the ground. Our mission is to protect the salmon, the trees... Fort Lewis provides better salmon habitat than the Forest Service."(82) In spite of the US army's long history of subjugation and genocide against American Indians, Billy Frank sees that there are now other more insidious and elusive enemies to both fish and Indians than the army: "You can deal with the army. The commanding general's the boss. It's not like with the governor or the president or the Secretary of the Interior. When I talk to those guys, I don't know who the hell's in charge."(80)

This book, filled with Billy Frank's narratives, reflects a distinctly American way of speaking about both environmental issues and Indian-white relations. Contained here is an implicit shrug that it is useless to explain tribal values to a dominant culture that refuses to pause and listen to the history of indigenous ways of understanding salmon and intricate relationships in nature. The government's history of war against Indian people is central to a foregoing story that confounds the imagination's ability to construct promising outcomes for both Aboriginal people and the environment. Billy explains that modern Indian tenacity is sadly practical with an informed sense of both history and hegemony:

> Then the white man came with his wars and his legislation, which was just another kind of war. Here's how I think of the Indian. He's running from the army. He fights. He runs and he fights again. He's tired. He's losing his people to war, disease. The white man is passing laws saying he can't do his ceremonies and dances, he can't speak his language. Then he stops running and fighting and he says, 'For us to survive, we have to do something different. I better save what I still have.' So he bows down and finds ways to adjust. (95)

It is an American voice, framed by a history of brutal domination of both Indians and the natural environment, that falters over the language of possibility for fisheries and environmental policy. However, In discussing the development of tribal resource management, Wilkinson reflects on how the dominant society might learn something from modern Indian priorities: "What would be the condition of our lands and waters if the federal and state governments were willing to commit such a large percentage of their financial resources to natural resources management?" (94)

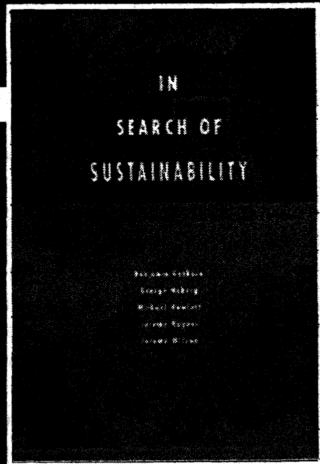
It is noteworthy as a cross-border commentary on this ethnohistorical/environmental writing that Taylor, Boxberger, and Wilkinson acknowledge Richard White as a significant theoretical influence while none of the authors in *Fishing Places, Fishing People: Traditions and Issues in Canadian Small-Scale Fisheries* even mention him. While First Nations are discussed in chapters by Newell, Ray, Thoms, Tough, and Usher and Tough there is no suggestion that American contexts might offer important comparative or theoretical prospects. Anyone familiar with the Boldt decision would see profound cross-border-twenty-year-time-lag commonalties in the present discussion of white response to First Nations' assertions of fishing rights. Contained within these essays however, are the identical stories, told on both sides of the border, about divergent ways of relating to salmon and nature. J. Michael Thoms, in "An Ojibway Community, American Sportsmen, and the Ontario Government in the Early Management of the Nipigon River Fishery" quotes from an elder telling about the cultural divide between white and Indian ways of relating to nature: "There is a moral to every story. Stories will tell you what to do when you kill an animal. White people have to be taught these things, but the Indian grows up with these things. Indian legends were how we learned. How to live involved, how not to waste. It is different from you people. Our stories tell us how we live." (176) *Fishing Places, Fishing People* gives us a valuable approach to the fishing crisis. By bringing forth histories where communities were created in relationship to the fish, we see a larger dimension to the resource. We see the complexity of "places where culture, ecology, economy, subsistence, and society are intertwined–are effectively indistinguishable from one another" (6). The chapters in this edited book show a consistent pattern of industrial destruction of not only fish, but people's ways of life that were embedded in natural systems.

Terry Glavin's collection of essays, *The Last Great Sea: A Voyage through the Human and Natural History of the North Pacific Ocean,* focuses on complex relationships between humans and natural forces. The book is ethnohistorical in that he traces the values, symbols, and deeply held beliefs of Aboriginal people who sustained intricate mythic relationships with all living things in their region. Glavin, like Taylor, is impressed with an Aboriginal fishery that was able to harvest more salmon than the commercial fleets of the 1900s but not deplete the resource. While Glavin tells a good story, and gets it mostly right, his popular journalistic style of writing may aggravate historians and scholars who tend to want a more critical interrogation of the secondary sources. However, the book is both informative and imaginative in its chronicle of contrasts. Aboriginal

lifeways are opposite to the values of an insatiable industrial society scouring the north Pacific as a commodity or as a potential "northwest passage" to other commodities. What is unusual and refreshing about Glavin's work is that he not only shows Aboriginal fisheries management as guided and informed by mythology, but also considers the way industrial fisheries were driven by a "mythology" of progress and pathological self-righteousness. This is a departure from other works which perfunctorily present Aboriginal fisheries as culturally informed through oral tradition and ritual, but neglect to consider that "science is not uninformed by myth" (206). Glavin concludes that "the commercial salmon fisheries that emerged in the North pacific in the mid -1800s exhibited an eerie, mirror-image opposite of aboriginal salmon fisheries management patterns. Fishing became increasingly concentrated at river mouths and in the ocean, in mixed-stock areas where the consequences of fishing were practically impossible to predict."(94)

Clearly the salmon crisis resides at the crossroads of a set of historical narratives about identity, power, and culturally constructed goals and purposes. The stories of Aboriginal people, combined with the ceremonies and rituals that flowed from them, defined a world that was both sacred and delicate. The old Indians were worried early on that the destructive and insolent behaviour of the white settlers would offend the salmon people. Their oral tradition told of how the salmon went away because of someone's disrespectful or greedy conduct. In many ways these narratives were more than just proscriptive; they were prophetic. Industrial and post-industrial society operating from its own stories of progress, technology, and individuality has produced hatcheries, fish farming, and a complex environmental science, but still the fish are going away. Apparently the stories of First Nations elders are neither obsolete nor irrelevant to our present reality. We need only awaken to the stories' power and deeper sensibilities. We should discover their essence without the sentimentalizing of "new age" quasi-ceremonies and we should move beyond an academic language that freezes the knowledge of Native people in a remote past rendered too impractical for our complex modern environment. The stories of the old people are profoundly connected to real places that they knew as home. If we wish to understand the relationships of fish, humans, and all other life in these places, we must come to know the stories that define these places. We must also come to know the histories of forces that threaten both fish and humans in such places.

# BC's Forests

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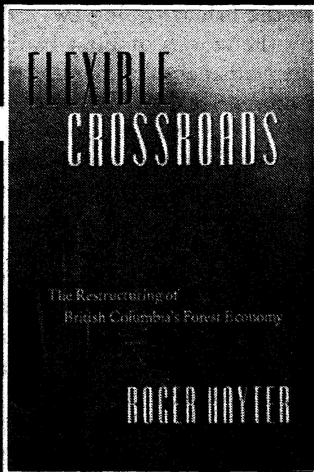


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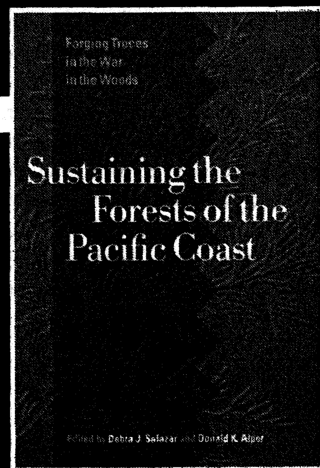


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