

*Uncommon Property: The Fishing and Fish-Processing Industries in British Columbia*, edited by Patricia Marchak, Neil Guppy, and John McMullan. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1989. Pp. 424; illus.; bibliography; index. \$21.95 paper.

Many carefully considered theories — political, biological, and economic — have met untimely ends in the B.C. fishing industry.

For example, few serious students of industry politics would argue any more, as did industry founder Henry Bell-Irving, that fishers and canners have a fundamental identity of interest.

Nor would biologists press any claims for the theory of maximum sustained yield, which already was in disrepute when B.C.'s once boundless herring stocks defied the experts and almost vanished in the late 1960s.

Economists, however, have shown much greater tenacity in the face of overwhelming evidence that their theory of the "tragedy of the commons" requires a major overhaul.

Jack Davis's notorious licence limitation plan of 1968 marked the first major offensive by the economists to end the deplorable overfishing, overcapitalization and "dissipation of rents" which was said to exist under the old open fishery. Yet capitalization soared and the allegedly overfished runs are coming back better than ever.

Little wonder that fisheries economist Blake Campbell concluded in 1972 that "fishermen do not behave in a classic manner based on theoretical economic guidelines. To assume that they do is inviting disaster."

The authors of this book appear not to have heeded this important finding.

Ten years after Campbell rang this alarm, members of the Anthropology and Sociology Department at the University of British Columbia obtained funding to undertake an unprecedented three-year research project on the political economy of the fishing industry. Both the timing and the scope of the project raised the prospect that this endlessly fascinating industry would be studied comprehensively for the first time. Sadly, that promise was not realized.

Mainstream economists have long insisted on two critical points about fisheries, the B.C. fisheries in particular. The first is that an open entry, common property fishery is inherently wasteful of capital and labour and can only be cured by the introduction of some form of private property rights.

The second article of faith, which is held by the authors of this book,

is that fishers who own their own vessel should be classified as businessmen, not workers.

Despite these declared truths, B.C. fishers have fought for almost a century to save the fishery from exclusive rights. Fishers also have defied economic theory and organized unions for 100 years, prosecuting strikes and winning a substantial number of court and political decisions confirming their right to bargain collectively.

Here let me declare my own bias. For twelve years, until early 1990, I was editor of *The Fisherman*, the newspaper of the United Fishermen and Allied Workers Union, an unparalleled but partisan vantage point in the industry. From that perspective, I can say that there is much in *Uncommon Property*, and in work published elsewhere by the research team, which is of unique and lasting value.

John McMullan's essay on "State, Capital and the B.C. Salmon-Fishery" is an excellent review of the interlocking strategy developed by major processors and the federal government to exploit the industry's wealth. Neil Guppy's paper, "Labouring at Sea: Harvesting Uncommon Property," contains valuable information on the reality of fishers' incomes and the overwhelming perception among fishers that the processors dictate the industry's economic life. Alicja Muszynski's papers pull together for the first time a picture of union organization in the shore plants, an area which has too often gone unnoticed.

But these important studies seem to have gone nowhere. Patricia Marchak's dispirited conclusion is that "this is not a situation involving good guys and bad guys: rather it is one in which numerous groups with competing interests are trying to solve an unresolvable contradiction" created by confusion about the nature of this "uncommon property." The only way out, Marchak says, is a "serious commitment by governments to a genuine consultation process."

This policy is a non-starter, as subsequent history has shown. Since government is not a neutral party to the disputes of the industry, as *Uncommon Property* has documented, it can hardly play the role of honest broker. That has always been the dream, however, of those who believe that fishers, processors, and government ultimately have the same economic interests at heart.

Because Marchak believes that fishers owning small boats should properly be classified as capital, groups endorsing this viewpoint receive disproportionate analysis. Here the book wanders into a labyrinth from which it never emerges. Obsessed with the "cleavages" between gillnetters and

seiners, natives and non-natives, sport fishers and commercial fishers, shoreworkers and fishers, Marchak becomes completely demoralized.

This tendency is most apparent in her account of a February 1984 workshop to which all industry groups except the union sent representatives to "hammer out a set of proposals for reviving the industry." Only a handful of fishers attended this meeting at a Vancouver Island resort. To Marchak's dismay, the UFAWU "sponsored a demonstration in Ottawa" during the same weekend.

The "demonstration" in this case was the three-day Fishermen's Survival Coalition lobby to Ottawa.

More than 100 fishers from every major industry group and every part of the coast travelled to Ottawa to meet with all three parties to oppose implementation of the Pearse report. It was the largest such effort in the history of the industry and, not surprisingly, the seminar went unnoticed. The conclusion seems obvious, but Marchak is unwilling to draw it. Despite the many "cleavages" of the industry, there is a strong majority support for certain basic principles advanced by the union.

The cornerstone of the coalition's campaign was the preservation of fisheries resources as the common property of the people of Canada. On this and many other issues, the UFAWU continues to win support far beyond its ranks, despite its stubborn insistence that its members are workers and that common property is not tragic.

This book would have been much stronger if it had concentrated on determining why this is so rather than seeking reasons why it should not be.

*Vancouver*

GEOFF MEGGS

*Economics and the Environment: A Reconciliation*, edited by Walter E. Block. Vancouver: Fraser Institute, 1989.

*The heat of the argument is inversely proportional to the credibility of the facts.*

It is both curious and lamentable that economists and environmentalists so often talk past each other. Curious because both groups are professionally trained to think in terms of systems where the components are linked together and everything depends more or less on everything else: atmospheric quality in the Canadian arctic depends upon sulphur emissions in Asia; a New York office building is structured of steel made in Luxembourg