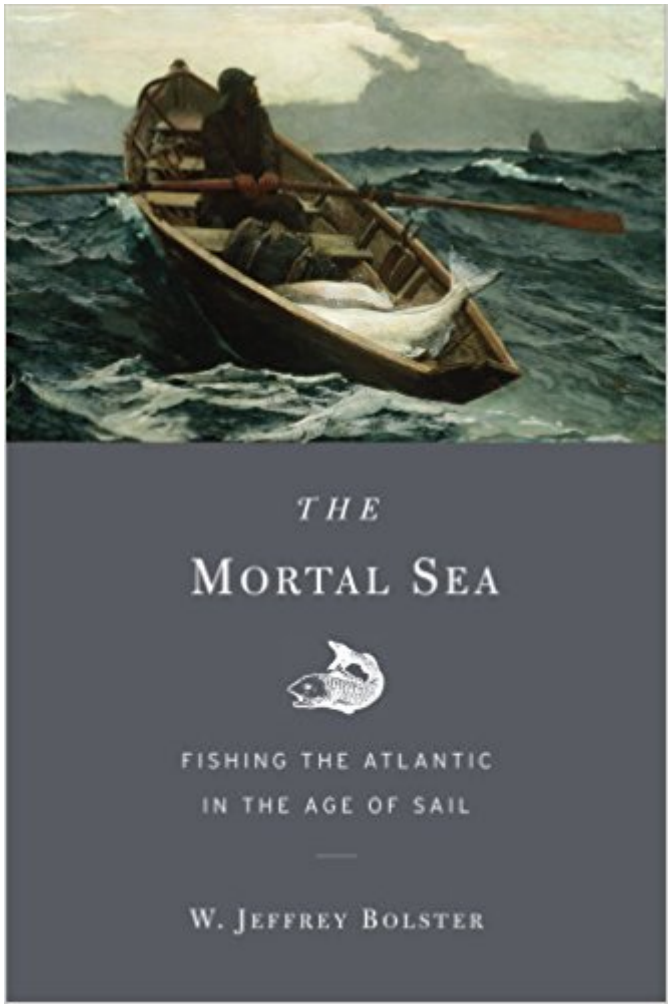
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The Mortal Sea: Fishing The Atlantic In The Age Of Sail



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Synopsis

Since the Viking ascendancy in the Middle Ages, the Atlantic has shaped the lives of people who depend upon it for survival. And just as surely, people have shaped the Atlantic. In his innovative account of this interdependency, W. Jeffrey Bolster, a historian and professional seafarer, takes us through a millennium-long environmental history of our impact on one of the largest ecosystems in the world. While overfishing is often thought of as a contemporary problem, Bolster reveals that humans were transforming the sea long before factory trawlers turned fishing from a handliner's art into an industrial enterprise. The western Atlantic's legendary fishing banks, stretching from Cape Cod to Newfoundland, have attracted fishermen for more than five hundred years. Bolster follows the effects of this siren's song from its medieval European origins to the advent of industrialized fishing in American waters at the beginning of the twentieth century. Blending marine biology, ecological insight, and a remarkable cast of characters, from notable explorers to scientists to an army of unknown fishermen, Bolster tells a story that is both ecological and human: the prelude to an environmental disaster. Over generations, harvesters created a quiet catastrophe as the sea could no longer renew itself. Bolster writes in the hope that the intimate relationship humans have long had with the ocean, and the species that live within it, can be restored for future generations.

Book Information

Paperback: 416 pages

Publisher: Belknap Press: An Imprint of Harvard University Press; First American Edition edition (May 5, 2014)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0674283961

ISBN-13: 978-0674283961

Product Dimensions: 6.1 x 1.1 x 9.1 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.4 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.6 out of 5 stars 24 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #560,464 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #72 inÃ Â Books > History > Americas > Canada > Province & Local #92 inÃ Â Books > Science & Math > Nature & Ecology > Natural Resources > Fisheries & Aquaculture #100 inÃ Â Books > History > World > Maritime History & Piracy

Customer Reviews

Bolster gives a fascinating account of the devastating impact of the sail-driven machinery that was

unleashed on the North Atlantic since the early Middle Ages, which now appears like a trial run for the coup de coup de grace in the twentieth century.--Daniel Pauly, Author Of "5 Easy Pieces: The Impact Of Fisheries On Marine Ecosystems"All hands on deck! Bolster makes an all-too-convincing case that the northwest Atlantic has been overfished for centuries and that we must act now to avert catastrophe.--Joyce E. Chaplin, Author Of "the First Scientific American: Benjamin Franklin And The Pursuit Of Genius""The Mortal Sea" looks at the North Atlantic and reveals how the marine stocks of the world arrived at the desperate pass they are in. This is a work of stunning importance.--Daniel Vickers, University Of British ColumbiaThis remarkable book will forever change our understanding of the human tragedy of overfishing that has fueled the downward spiral of ecological destruction of the oceans. It is a story of hubris, greed, and a stubborn failure to learn from experience that continues unabated to this day.--Jeremy Jackson, Coeditor Of "shifting Baselines: The Past And The Future Of Ocean Fisheries""The Mortal Sea" is highly pertinent to urgent matters before us now. If in the late 1800s the men who worked the sea for their livelihoods could see that creatures were being fished to extinction, while scientists in the employ of business interests argued that the seas were endlessly replenishable, today it is the other way around. Scientists argue that human activity has placed the planet in uncertain but potentially calamitous peril, while ordinary people shrug at the evidence and go on misusing the Earth’s resources, abetted by governments too cowardly and businesses too self-interested to take that evidence seriously..."The Mortal Sea" should be read as a cautionary tale...Anyone who thinks...this book is only about fish is living in a fool’s paradise.--Jonathan Yardley"Washington Post" (10/28/2012)[A] well-documented and fascinating chronicle of New England’s interdependence with the sea from the 16th century to the World War I era. In "The Mortal Sea", Bolster skillfully weaves material from historical documents and newspaper and scientific reports with tales of fishermen to demonstrate how the activities of individuals have affected the northwest Atlantic, for better and worse.--Michael Kenney"Boston Globe" (11/07/2012)"The Mortal Sea" chronicles the history of the fishing industry in the North West Atlantic over the past 500 years. Based on a comprehensive set of original sources, it charts the fascinating and ultimately disastrous story of how successive waves of European seafarers arrived to take advantage of the fishing opportunities that had become distant memories in their own more circumscribed and heavily exploited home waters...Such is the complexity of marine ecosystems that the recovery of severely depleted cod populations is taking decades longer than simple theory would suggest. "The Mortal Sea" is a beautifully written chronicle of what lay before this latest catastrophe and much earlier dire outcomes of poorly regulated fishing. As an authoritatively written natural history of the developing fishing communities of the North West Atlantic, it makes an

important contribution to fishery science as well as to social history.--Richard Shelton"Times Literary Supplement" (03/22/2013)Bolster has mined evidence from a wide range of contemporary sources that convincingly demonstrates the widespread overfishing and sequential depletion of bird, fish, and marine mammal stocks before the advent of steamships and modern trawlers...Essential reading for anyone interested in the sea and its resources.--G. C. Jensen"Choice" (05/01/2013)

W. Jeffrey Bolster is Professor of History at the University of New Hampshire.

A stupendous book. Of course, growing up in the age of Mrs. Paul’s fish sticks and TV ads for Gortons of Gloucester, and Captains Courageous and The Perfect Storm, I’ve been aware of fish and fishing. Add to that the health industry’s not very helpful back-and-forth of "fish is bad for you, it has mercury in it" and "fish is good for you, it has omega 3 oils." But since I moved to the New Hampshire seacoast (fourteen years ago yesterday, Feb 02, 2013) my curiosity has been piqued. The news about the fishing industry is constant. And government opinions and scientists’ opinions in the local and national news, are constantly counter balanced (and what a balance it is, with at least three armies battling for the high ground) with the fishermen and their families who are my ubiquitous neighbors.I bought this book after it was reviewed and the author interviewed in the Portsmouth (NH) local paper, THE WiRE. At last, a book that attempts to make it all clear for the reader: what is the problem, how did it become the problem, what is the solution. But, as with all good stories, nothing about fishing is that simple. So the author begins with the Vikings in the New World and covers the history of fishing the northwest Atlantic until about 1930’s, and the last cry of the age of sails. It’s a tremendous story, full of rich detail, and every actor in it has contradictory motives.It is also, I must warn, an extremely erudite book. This was a hard read, on a Masters or Doctorate level. Extremely rich, complex vocabulary and compound-complex sentence structure that had me re-reading pages on many occasions. But I don’t get the impression that it is showiness for the sake of showiness. (Grammar usually goes hay-wire when an author is substituting ego-driven logorrhea for sense.) The author has a complex subject and there is simply no way to cover it, fairly (and let me emphasize, all voices are represented here), without resorting to all the devices available to him in the rhetorical arsenal at his command.That said, the book is generous, each chapters has an introduction and a conclusion that helps clarify what you are about to read and have just read. There are many illustrations, helpful graphs, and a (rather incomplete, but all the same, useful) glossary. And, as expected, I learned a lot about history, geography, politics, "those who go down to the sea in ships," and the implicit catastrophe when people who believe a resource

is unlimited clash with people who know it isn't. If you want further encouragement to read this book, imagine this. Imagine the amount of research and good story telling that brings you to this point, on pp. 278-279:"It is not as if one constituency--whether fishermen, or scientists, or politicians--ever spoke with consistency on the issue. They did not. There is plenty of blame to go around; and some accolades, too. At certain times well-informed, moral, or farsighted individuals, including fishermen, scientists, and politicians, spoke openly about how their friends and neighbors (along with others, sometimes no so friendly or neighborly) were destroying the resource base on which a great business rested, not to mention food and jobs for the future. If there is any lesson in this saga, it is not that the fishermen were (or are) to blame, or that the scientists were (or are) to blame, or that the politicians were (or are) to blame. The interlocked system was (and is) to blame. That system, with its checks and balances, its desire for prosperity and security, its willingness to honor a multiplicity of voices, its changing sense of "normal," and its shifting ecological baselines, was (and is) insufficiently nimble to stop the desecration of commonly held resources on which the long-term good of everyone depended (and depends)."A stupendous book.

I gave this book five stars because it is meticulously-researched, well-written, and because it deals with an important and interesting topic. Jeffrey Bolster takes up the history of fishing and the marine ecosystem of the North Atlantic. He focuses on the four centuries between 1520 and 1920. Bolster says that during this period, each successive generation that fished the rivers and off the coasts of places like Massachusetts, Maine, Nova Scotia, and Newfoundland perceived that it was depleting the natural environment. What none of those generations realized, though, was that not only was their perception correct, successive generations were doing the same thing--overfishing--in an unbroken chain. Each generation's baseline for what counted as large and numerous fish moved a step further down. Moreover, the ecosystem in which they worked was not immortal, as many assumed. It was not immutable, as many hoped. In reality, it was much more complex and vulnerable than anyone fully understood. Consequently, over hundreds of years that ecosystem was being pushed closer and closer to the brink of collapse, the condition we find today.With this book, Bolster does at least four things. First, he tells the environmental history of the North Atlantic from the standpoint of the longue duree, the long view. Second, and related to the first point, he shows how only a centuries-long study can point up the ocean's fragility and decline. Third, he insists that, at long last, the Atlantic itself should be recognized as a character in the history of the Atlantic World. Fourth, he sounds an alarm by announcing how far humans have to go in any course designed to resuscitate the North Atlantic. Because of its many strengths, this book will continue to

be significant for long while.

Jeff Bolster writes about the sea as few know how to do. He demolishes the myth of theeternal sea, showing how much the North Atlantic has changed over hundreds of years of humanexploitation. He knows his fish, but he also knows the fishers. This is environmental andsocial history of the highest order, a decisive intervention in the current debates aboutour future relationship to the oceans. It takes history offshore, and returns it richerfor the voyage into this largely unknown past.

We usually think that we humans have the capacity to learn from mistakes and look forward to set up better living conditions at long term timescales. This book shows us that we overrate ourselves. Fishing management is a classical example of mismanagement and conflicts between science and politics, where short term interests, maximizing profits, are always more important than provide limits to exploitation of resources former known as renewables.Unfortunetly this is not a book that makes hopes arise. Well funded in historical statistics and strong evidences of collective blindness, it confirms a tendency to oceans' death in few decades.Can we humans learn from history?

I bought this book because it looked like it would have some interesting tales of shipping on the Atlantic.However it gives an incredibly detailed history of how successive generations have been destroying the fisheries of the Atlantic ocean. The book makes it clear how as far back as the first generations to migrate to America, the oceans have been deteriorating. Each generation has looked back at its early years as a baseline and lamented the destruction of the oceans. But the cumulative effect of generation upon generation of losses is unimaginable.I found the book heavy going. It tends to go on and on about the same point. But still, it makes a very important point about the degradation of marine environments and makes clear the need to do more to improve the state of our oceans.

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