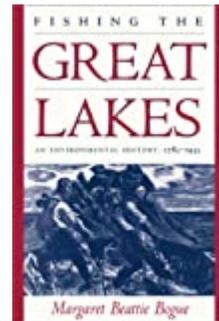




Margaret Beattie Bogue. *Fishing the Great Lakes: An Environmental History, 1783-1933.* Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2000. xix + 444 pp. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-299-16764-6.



Reviewed by Terence Kehoe (Morgan, Angel & Associates, Washington, DC)

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Strangling the Golden Goose

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Preserving major fisheries is one of the most challenging tasks faced by environmental policy makers, who have to contend with complex ecosystems, international rivalries, and the often short-term perspective of the commercial fishing industry. In *Fishing the Great Lakes*, Margaret Beattie Bogue examines earlier efforts to protect and maintain an abundant resource that provided a living for over 13,000 persons during the heyday of Great Lakes commercial fishing in the 1880s. Her story is not an encouraging one.

In general terms, the subject of this study is one that students of environmental history will find familiar. As Bogue notes, the history of the Great Lakes fishing industry is “yet another example of a highly competitive, virtually unregulated, and wasteful exploitation of a natural resource for profit that over time seriously eroded its commercial utility.” (p. 44) In spite of the familiarity of its themes, *Fishing the Great Lakes* is an important contribution to the field of environmental history. This book is the product of extensive research in archival and published sources in both the United States and Canada.

The approach is comprehensive, as Bogue addresses developments in business, technology, aquatic science, politics, diplomacy, and other areas that affected the use and health of the Great Lakes’ vast fisheries. In short, *Fishing the Great Lakes* is a very sophisticated historical study of a problem common in human affairs: how to use and yet also protect and preserve a valuable but easily accessible natural resource

Historical evidence about the early abundance of Great Lakes fish species is plentiful. Fish were a mainstay in the subsistence patterns of many Great Lakes Indians. The first European settlers in the region also made whitefish, salmon, and other species a component of a subsistence diet, but it did not take long for fish to become articles of commerce in an expanding market economy. Bogue’s chapters on the development of the Great Lakes fishing industry in the nineteenth century are among the strongest in the book. The large wholesale fish dealers in the United States who came to dominate the industry were aggressive in applying new technologies such as steam power that allowed them to harvest the Great Lakes fisheries in progressively more intensive fashion.

The industry employed seine, pound, and gill nets on an increasingly larger scale, wasting millions of tons of fish in the process. On the marketing side, the dealers used refrigeration and new modes of transport to supply fresh fish to consumers throughout the region. The leading entrepreneurs in the fishing industry of the second half of the nineteenth century exhibited the same qualities that characterized their counterparts in other American industries. Unfortunately, the aggressiveness, innovation, and ruthlessness that powered the American economy of this period made little room for any sense of environmental stewardship.

The expanding fishing industry was only part of the problem. The growth of an urban-industrial society around parts of the Great Lakes reshaped the aquatic environment. Inadequately treated sewage and industrial wastes created severe local problems. The environmental changes wrought by widespread agricultural production were less dramatic but profound and far-reaching. The sensitive Lake Ontario salmon was the first commercially valuable species to exhibit signs of stress. By the mid-nineteenth century, this once abundant fish had almost completely disappeared from the lake. The four mainstays of the Great Lakes commercial fishing industry—lake trout, white fish, sturgeon, and herring—were more widespread and less vulnerable than the salmon. But by the late nineteenth century, danger signs were evident in those parts of the lakes that were fished most intensively or that adjoined urban-industrial regions. As the populations of the major commercial species declined, the numbers for carp, pike, and other less commercially valuable “rough fish” grew. The latter species of fish were more likely to thrive in polluted waters that were turbid and lower in oxygen, among other characteristics.

As one might expect, given the disparate political cultures of the two nations, government efforts to regulate fishing practices and protect valuable fisheries were very different in the United States and Canada. In general, fishermen in the American section of the basin effectively faced very little regulation, while their Canadian counterparts were required to obtain licenses and obey a variety of laws and regulations designed to preserve the fisheries. These national differences were a source of considerable tension between the two countries, especially since American fishermen had no reservations about entering Canadian waters to seek their catch. For these and other reasons, Canadian officials found it a continuing battle to enforce their fishing regulations. For the most part, commercial fishermen in both nations resisted regulation. While they could see the value of such controls

in principle, they were suspicious of regulation in practice: “Regulations could not be enforced equitably. Those who obeyed the law lost in the economic contest to those who broke it and reaped larger harvests. Regulations handicapped the fishers in an aggressive, highly competitive, and overcrowded business in which open fishing rewarded the most efficient with the biggest catch.” (p. 187).

In spite of this situation, evidence indicates that the Canadian system of regulation, flawed as it was, did prove more effective than the American system of unfettered exploitation at preserving—or at least slowing the decline of—fish populations in Canadian waters. This was the conclusion that many American scientists and officials concerned with Great Lakes fisheries had reached by the end of the nineteenth century, although they had little success in changing policy. The consensus among fishery experts in both countries after the early 1890s was that the best hope for the Great Lakes fisheries was the establishment of some kind of uniform system of regulation for the entire Great Lakes Basin. This goal was not achieved. Great Britain (acting on behalf of Canada) and the United States ratified a treaty in 1908 designed to create such a uniform regulatory framework, but the governments could not agree on the details of implementation, and Britain withdrew from the treaty in 1914. Rivalry between the provinces and the dominion government and the states and the federal government helped undermine the treaty. Bogue argues that the barriers to effective environmental management inherent in this divided governmental jurisdiction (“flawed federalism”) was a major factor in the failure of policy makers to take more effective action to protect the fisheries.

Harvesting of the Great Lakes fisheries became even more intense during World War I as both governments encouraged maximum production and effectively set aside the conservation measures that did exist. After the war, Ontario gained greater authority to regulate its waters. Provincial officials loosened fishery regulations and ushered in an era of American-style exploitation that greatly increased the harvest in Canadian waters. In the 1920s, the crash of the herring population in Lake Erie—the most productive of the Great Lakes—signaled the dawn of a new era. In addition, the introduction of the sea lamprey to the upper Great Lakes in subsequent decades had a devastating impact on those lakes’ fish populations. (Bogue devotes a relatively small amount of attention to the introduction of exotic species to the Great Lakes, as these became more of a factor after her period.)

Fishing the Great Lakes is a fine work of scholarship. I should, however, warn prospective readers that the book can be slow going at times. The thematic organization results in a certain degree of redundancy, and some readers may be faced with more detail than they care to digest. Still, the book is clearly written, and numerous illustration and tables add to its usefulness. I would also have liked at least a brief discussion of developments in the Great Lakes fisheries since the 1930s. Like the Great Lakes ecosystem generally, the fisheries of these vast in-

land seas have experienced a degree of rejuvenation in recent decades, while continuing to face an array of complicated problems. Even with continued progress, the Great Lakes fisheries will remain vastly different from those that thrived in the basin in the early nineteenth century

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