

The First Fisheries Crisis Was Reported by the New York Times in 1874

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FishNet USA - October 9, 2007

*The charge brought against the menhaden fishermen is not that they catch edible fish, but rather by the enormous takes of the **Brevoortia tyrannus** they deprive edible fish of their food, for the menhaden is supposed to be the main source of support to several fish on our coast, notably the striped bass and the blue-fish. It may be remarked that a great deal of undigested stuff has been presented of late to the public in regard to that relationship which one creature is supposed to bear to another. The economy of the seas has been treated in a very crude and perfunctory manner. Facts to substantiate these theories are very much wanted. Artificial sequences are made where there are no links. A certain kind of fish is scarce one year, and at once people reach conclusions without much consideration of the subject. The phenomena of nature are not to be understood by the experience of one year or of ten. It takes a century to fathom them.*

*There is the blue-fish, fairly plentiful today, notwithstanding the alleged disturbance brought about by the menhaden fishermen. According to researches made by the United States Fish Commissioner, there was a time, many years ago, when **Pomatomus saltatrix** was scarcely found at all on our coast, and certainly menhaden were not taken then. It can be remembered when mackerel was so scarce some years ago that a petition was sent to legislators of the New England States declaring that this most important fishery was likely to be lost forever, and a request was made that the methods of catching mackerel be changed. As Mr. Blackford told Senator Lapham, mackerel have been more abundant this season than for the last 20 years."*

If you're in a quandary because you're not familiar with a Senator Lapham, don't be. The quote is from an article from the September 10, 1882 New York Times (*Questions of food fish*). The undisclosed author goes on:

"In the fall of 1881 an immense quantity of weak-fish were taken by the menhaden fishermen, and were possibly wasted, because the New-York market could not handle them in quantity. Wise men then prophesied that there would not be a single weak-fish in 1882, and still these fish have been rather more abundant this season than usual. The truth is that we know next to nothing of these subjects."

But the arguments used against the menhaden harvesters back in 1882 are the same arguments as those currently being used against menhaden harvesters in the Chesapeake Bay and herring harvesters in the Gulf of Maine. Unfortunately, our unknown late-nineteenth century reporter was way off base on one issue; it's been well over a century and we're still far from fathoming the phenomena of nature, at least as far as fisheries and predator, prey and forage issues are concerned. Hence our continuing reliance on public pressure rather than solid science in fisheries management. It's what's behind the "stop the localized depletion" campaigns in New England and Virginia; campaigns that are being pursued by competing fishermen and financed by anti-fishing advocacy groups.

"Atlantic herring is a vital source of food for commercially and recreationally important fish stocks such as tuna, haddock, cod, striped bass, whiting, and dogfish as well as for seabirds, whales, seals, dolphins and porpoises. Unfortunately, industrial midwater trawling for herring is managed with little regard to the ecological importance of herring in the marine food web." (From the Herring Alliance website. Though promoting itself as "a coalition of environmental and other public interest organizations," the Herring Alliance, founded by The Pew Trusts, is made up almost entirely of "conservation" organizations that have collectively received well over \$100 million in funding from the Pew Trusts.)

Were we to believe the doom-and-gloom prognostications of the agenda-driven "conservationists" that are so faithfully reported as gospel by the print and broadcast media today, we would think that, due to recent advances in technology, in cupidity, and in government ineptitude, we were on the brink of a fisheries disaster of unprecedented proportions. However, a couple of days spent digging through the on-line archives of the New York Times bears out that, at least when it comes to matters dealing with fishing, the pronouncement in the Old Testament that there is nothing new under the sun (Ecclesiastes 1:1-3 NIV) is dead on. We've either been on the brink of actual fishing disasters since humankind started fishing or we've been victims of manufactured disasters which have nothing to do with the welfare of the fish and everything to do with agenda-driven campaigning.

Readers of The Times have been exposed to periodic “the fish are going away because of fishing” articles for at least as far as the on-line archives go back. Like today’s fisheries crises, these articles focus on a small handful of purported causes; new and too efficient vessels and/or techniques, lack of adequate government controls, short-sightedness of the greedy fishermen (or the corporate interests that control them), periodic “disappearances” of particular species, and non-selective gear.

Technological innovations and the demise of fisheries

As an example, on the subject of increasing efficiency we have the following progression of articles spanning almost four decades and all reporting on projected pending catastrophes because of the use of more efficient gear. (Note that back then what are now called bottom longlines were called trawls or tub trawls. To avoid confusion, where the articles are referring to bottom longlines as trawls, I’ll insert [tub] before “trawls” to differentiate them from the otter trawls in use today).

“[Tub] trawl fishing, by destroying the young of those species of fish which take the hook, has greatly thinned out their number and lessened the size of those captured off our coast; and with each succeeding year the fishermen have to go further and fare worse. This indiscriminate destruction of young fish for a trifling present advantage is the modern illustration of killing the goose which lays the golden eggs; but it is not easy to suggest a remedy, for in the case of (tub) trawl fishing, unlike the lobster fishing, every very small fish is a present loss to the fisherman.” (***Small Lobsters and Little Fishes***, January 26, 1874, NY Times)

“For many years in the early days of codfishing the only method of taking the fish was by the use of what are now termed hand lines, to distinguish them from set lines or [tub] trawls. At length [tub] trawl-fishing was introduced, to the intense disgust of the hand-liners, who declared that the [tub] trawlers would kill off all the fish, or at least thin them out to such an extent as to destroy the fishing business; but the use of [tub] trawls became more and more common, until now the hand-line fishing done is but trifling. Recently we were informed that a new method of capturing codfish had been introduced, to wit, the employment of a gill net, with which the [tub] trawlers were as much displeased as the handliners were with the [tub] trawls on their first appearance....” (***Catching Codfish With Nets***, The New York Times – taken from the Portsmouth (N.H.) Chronicle, January 4, 1881)

“The present pound nets are the product of American ingenuity, and are far more effective than the older devices which they began to supplant about forty years ago, and the adoption of which initiated a gradually-increasing dearth. Prior to their general introduction twenty years later tens of thousands of line fishermen sustained themselves in comfort by the occasional or regular exercise of their vocation, fish being generally in great abundance.... The pound nets are the property of but very few individuals, who cannot rightfully claim for themselves the appropriation of substantially the entire product of public waters.” (***Food Fish Becoming Scarce***, December 17, 1893)

“The cod and haddock on the smaller banks off the Eastern Coast have been growing scarcer as well as smaller in size for the past twenty years. This is probably due to the wholesale manner of fishing with [tub] trawls, whereby hundreds of short lines with baited hooks attached and connected with a long main line are cast at one time and allowed to remain overnight. If handlining were employed exclusively, as was the case many years ago, when catches were always satisfactory, it is probable a change for the better would result.” (John Z. Rogers, ***Decline of our fisheries***, NY Times, August 11, 1901)

“Is the steam trawler going to drive net fishermen out of business? Although the merits and demerits of beam trawling and otter trawling, which are essentially similar, had long been the subject of much controversy and numerous investigations in Europe, there never has been occasion for either in the United States until the rapid augmentation of the Boston steam-trawling fleet after 1910 aroused the line fishermen to apprehension concerning the conservation of the fishing banks and a realization that they were face to face with a possible revolution in the methods of fishing.... In consequence of the increased size of modern type of vessels, much more fishing gear is now operated by each vessel than was customary thirty or forty years ago.... While the facts show no proof or presumption of any depletion in the fisheries on the banks frequented by American otter trawlers, it is possible, these experts say, that the seeds of damage already have been sown and that their fruits may appear in the future or that the development of a wholly unregulated fishery eventually may result in injury where none now exists.” (***Will Steam Trawler Put Net Fishermen Out of Business?*** New York Times, January 14, 1917.)

We have a progression (in terms of efficiency of harvesting) from handlines employing one or several hooks at the end of a single vertically suspended line, through tub trawls employing hundreds of hooks attached to a horizontal line lying on the bottom and pound nets anchored to pilings in the surf zone, to gill nets employing a stationary net suspended in the water column, and culminating in beam and otter trawls in which the nets are dragged along the bottom. The adoption of each of these gear types, which are nothing more than stages in the technological development of the fisheries, was resisted by those not willing to take the next step. Resistance was based on the grounds that the adoption of the more efficient gear would: result in killing the goose that laid the golden egg, kill off all the fish, result in a cod/haddock catch that was scarcer as well as smaller, cause injury to the fisheries where none now exists, or allow the appropriation of substantially the entire product of public waters. The Times reported over forty years of imminent disasters, but those supposed disasters were due to nothing more than increased efficiency in seafood harvesting.

Did the fish disappear after the introduction of tub trawling or gill netting or otter trawling or after the shift to steam or diesel power? Definitely not. But had The Times been in business when our ancestors shifted from chewing on dead fish they stumbled upon while walking on the beach to killing the fish themselves, when they advanced from throwing rocks at the fish to spearing them, from spears to hooks, from hooks to weirs, when they discovered they could catch more fish by wading after them, that using rafts was more effective than wading, that rafts moved better when propelled by paddles than by arms and legs, that oars worked better than paddles or that sails were a great way to move a boat, with each innovation we can imagine a string of articles predicting the imminent extinction of the fisheries.

Is it really overfishing caused by increased harvesting efficiency?

Looking at domestic fisheries landings for as long as reliable records are available, which according to the National Marine Fisheries Service's on-line commercial landings database goes back to 1950, they have stayed surprisingly constant; and constant not just relative to total tonnage, but constant relative to the species mix that comprises the total tonnage. Due to a wealth of anthropogenic and natural factors, fisheries come and fisheries go, but the overall level of catching hasn't varied very much in spite of revolutionary technological innovations since the 1950s such as the introduction of synthetic materials in nets, the shift from sail to power, the introduction of diesel engines, the development of sonar or loran or GPS. (See "Blame it all on overfishing" at http://www.fishnet-usa.com/then_now.html)

Or is it just "my fishing is nicer than your fishing"

The menhaden quote that we started off with was sagely preceded in the original article by "*there never was a fisherman who, using one kind of net, did not inveigh against another fisherman who used a different kind of net. His own method of catching fish was always the least injurious to his neighbor's business.*" The author recognized that the claims of imminent ruin of particular fisheries were nothing more than weapons deployed in the seemingly endless squabbles between fishermen using different gear types.

These squabbles, at least in the early years, are exemplified by a series of articles in the Times beginning with the editorial *A Big Net* on July 22, 1889. The editorial starts out "*Richard Wanser is the name of the man who took eight tons of weak-fish out of Jamaica Bay with a net last Thursday. Pot fishermen have a right to live, we suppose. Moreover, anglers being a mild and law-abiding set of men, there is no danger of Wanser's being tarred and feathered by way of warning to the growing number of mar-sports like him. Whoever, being fast by the heels in the city during Summer, is accustomed to fish for health and food knows that reels for nets are springing up everywhere, and especially at Jamaica Bay.*"

This editorial was the first salvo in an anti-netting campaign focused on Jamaica Bay (which is bounded by Brooklyn and Queens in New York City) and designed to lock commercial net fishermen out of the bay. It culminated the next year in the passage of what was then called the Stadler Bill, which made it illegal to fish in Jamaica Bay with seines or other nets.

The Times ran at least a dozen articles and letters on the "ruination" of Jamaica Bay by a handful of fishermen from Canarsie. They made liberal use of the "save the bay" mantra, which actually meant "save the bay for fishermen (anglers in those days) who didn't use nets." The rhetoric well over a hundred years ago was in large part identical to that used by one fishing group against another today.

One of the articles (*Give The Fish A Chance*, March 3, 1890) even suggested that the offending net fishermen would be better off financially once their means of making a living was legislated away. "*Some of the Rockaway people (the anti-netters) have been investigating the matter and find that eight net men are keeping the fish depleted in Jamaica Bay. These*

men average 60 cents a day from their business, it is said. It has been calculated that by letting (renting) their boats or taking out (recreational fishing) parties when there was good fishing in the bay they would at least make \$3 a day. So it is not feared that any great hardship would come upon them by the passage of the bill. The bay is simply at their mercy now.” And there was the obligatory nod to the “it’s not just here, all commercial netting is bad” argument: ““these same complaints have come from many other places where New-York fishermen are accustomed to go’ said a member of the Redfield Fishing Club who was present at the meeting. ‘On the Great South Bay, off the North Shore, Gardiners Bay, and near Plum Island the fishing has deteriorated wonderfully. You ask the cause, and the same old answer is given, that it is all due to the ravages of net and seine fishermen.’”

In a NY Times **Rod and Gun** column, Vernon Van Ness wrote “that the sportsmen and commercial men will come to grips now seems certain. Bills are being prepared for presentation which would restrict fishing in all the bays of Long Island and, furthermore, make commercial fishing in many areas illegal.... It is the contention of those favoring the bills that if commercial fishermen would cooperate they would find, in the long run, that they would profit more under the proposed restrictions than otherwise. It is argued that if these commercial men would cater to the sportsmen they could make more money than from commercial fishing” (01/13/1934).

And the angler/netter controversy certainly didn’t end there. Peter Mathiessen wrote in **Men’s Lives** (Random House, 1986) “every year since 1981, a bill designed to curtail or eliminate the net fishery of striped bass has been submitted to the New York State Legislature, accompanied by a great amount of paper-waving, fish-shaking, and shouting, and a pervasive outrage not unlike the crackling sputter of a basket of blue crabs.... With self-serving statistics and conservation propaganda, the sportsmen’s lobbies were establishing sly tactics that would harass the netters for the next twenty-five years.”

Not willing to accept the fact that a dead fish is a dead fish, no matter what gear was responsible for its demise, the same arguments are still being used by some recreational fishing groups while attempting to evict commercial fishermen from fisheries or from areas that they want as their own. In one of the most recent examples of this mindset, New Jersey recreational fishing groups have been trying to get that state’s extensive artificial reef system declared their own private fishing preserves (see Andy Newman’s article “**Battlegrounds of Rot and Rust**” in the September 9, 2007 New York Times)

There go the fisheries, again and again....

But the doom and gloom wasn’t and still isn’t limited to particular gear types or locations. We were supposed to be running out of fish back then just as we are supposed to be running out of fish today.

“Constant fishing has depleted certain species of fish, and even in bottom fishing, to say nothing of the gamer species, in the past twenty years no fish as coarse as a cod has been taken in weight and size equal to those of our granddadies’ days. This is also true of the striped bass. It is true of the bluefish, also of the weakfish. Drums and sheepshead are not nearly so numerous or so plentiful....” (**Angling Clubs to Meet Here**, NY Times, November 3, 1907)

“Marketable fish have become as dear as beef, lamb, veal and pork. The reason is not alone to be found in the doubled cost of labor, boats and tackle. When Mr. HOOVER opens the fish-for-food conference he will tell the delegates that favorite seafood becomes scarcer every year. Demand is far greater than supply. (**Fish For All Tables**, NY Times, May 1, 1925)

All this is so much background to the fact that Georges Bank in particular, and the Gulf of Maine to a lesser degree, are being drilled to the verge of spoliation. Fishermen themselves admit the going is pretty rough on Georges Bank, and getting worse every year (Garside, E.B., **Fewer Fish on the Banks**, The New York Times, May 1, 1949).

“We are rapidly destroying the continental shelf. We are overfishing it, and we are using fishing techniques that pollute and disturb its delicate bottom environment.” D.E. Thompson, *Taking Too Much off the Shelf* (Review of **The Forests of the Sea** by John E. Culliney) NY Times 06/19/1977

“The New England fishing grounds have a glorious past, but no future. They have been overworked. But that doesn’t mean it is the end of the fishing business. There are plenty of good fishing grounds still” Quoting Robert

Fletcher, President of Booth Fisheries Corporation – “the nation’s No. 1 producer, processor and distributor of fish and seafood” in Personality: A Fisher in a Troubled Industry, NY Times, August 17, 1978.

If you believe what you read, our fisheries have been going to hell in a handbasket for generation after generation.

It seems that the sky, as professed by the anti-fishing activists, has been falling for all of the last century. The modern scourge of overfishing, has been around for over a century, commercial fishermen – or various types of netters – have been driving fisheries into oblivion and various types of gear have been despoiling habitat for all of that time. And yet we’re still catching as many fish as we ever caught, and there isn’t a trace of evidence that we’re fishing down the food chain as we’re doing it.

The sky was falling in the North Atlantic swordfish fishery in the late eighties.

“Back in 1989 an amendment to the Atlantic Swordfish FMP was put forth by the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council that would have reduced the U.S. commercial swordfish harvest by 78%, closed the directed swordfish longline fishery and reduced the commercial harvest of swordfish to those landed as bycatch in other fisheries. This drastic reduction, which would have inflicted an incalculable amount of suffering on a large portion of the East and Gulf Coast commercial fishing industry, was supported by alarmist statements such as the following:

- *‘The Councils and their scientific advisers believe that such severe restrictions are necessary...to prevent a resource collapse.’ (Steven Berkley in the N.O.A.A. Tuna Newsletter issue 96, February 1990).*
- *‘The Atlantic stock of swordfish is considered to be severely overfished... total allowable catch (proposed) for the U.S. fishery is 1.85 million pounds (dressed weight) for the initial year (1981).’ (South Atlantic Council news release announcing the proposed management program dated December 8, 1989).*
- *‘The most recent scientific assessment...leaves no doubt whatsoever that the North Atlantic stock is in extremely poor condition, and that an immediate, substantial reduction in harvest is necessary to prevent a collapse in the fishery... a 78% reduction in fishing effort will be required to restore the population of swordfish to a “safe” level... we support this management goal and urge the Councils...to set a total allowable catch of 2.42 million pounds a year.... approximately equal to 22% of the 1987 U.S. catch.’ (Ken Hinman, Executive Director of the National Coalition for Marine Conservation in a letter to the South Atlantic Council dated June 2, 1989.)’*

I wrote this in 1993. This was about the time that the so-called “conservationists” began to take notice of ocean issues. Much of their notice, it appears, was the result of some serious encouragement – tens of millions of dollars a year - from the Pew Charitable Trusts and their multi-billion dollar Big Oil endowment. At the time I was able to follow the above words with:

“Fortunately for the commercial fishing industry - and the coastal economy from Florida to Maine - this overblown rhetoric was eventually recognized for what it was, cooler heads prevailed and at the suggestion of industry and with much support from Congress a more reasonable management regime was adopted. This alternative management program imposed a 20% reduction on commercial swordfish landings, allowed for significant swordfish conservation efforts and permitted those in or dependent on the swordfish fishery to adjust to the reduction and to the other requirements of the plan.

The industry survived, the swordfish survived and thousands of jobs and millions of dollars were saved. In spite of the predictions of imminent collapse of the stocks unless the directed fishery was closed, the swordfish fleet is still contributing tens of millions of dollars to our coastal communities each year.”

And even later, thanks to an effective conservation program in part developed and fully supported by the domestic swordfish fishery and in spite of a Pew-funded campaign that appeared to be aimed at the virtual elimination of that same fishery, the swordfish stocks in the North Atlantic were declared “fully recovered.” According to the National Marine Fisheries Service, the North Atlantic swordfish biomass is at 99% of the level that supports maximum sustainable yield, the fishery is not overfished and overfishing is not occurring (http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/fishwatch/species/n_atl_swordfish.htm).

An original idea is so hard to find

The anti-fishing activists, and the media representatives that unquestioningly support their outrageous claims, seem to be as addicted to schooling behavior as some of those fish that they claim to represent. One of the most convincing examples of their dependence on follow-the-leader piling-on occurred about ten years ago, when one of their number stumbled on the really strained analogy of really big nets and really big airplanes. Over the course of several years we had:

“... Computerized ships as large as football fields. Their nets--wide enough to swallow a dozen Boeing 747s....” (from *The Fish Crisis* in Time Magazine’s September 1, 1997 issue).

“...And bag-shaped trawl nets large enough to engulf twelve Boeing 747 jetliners (from a SeaWeb website background article **World’s Imperiled Fish** by Carl Safina originally published in Scientific American).

“One of the world’s biggest trawl nets could encircle more than a dozen ‘jumbo jet’ Boeing 747 aircraft at its opening” (from the Greenpeace web page *Amazing Facts About The Global Fishing Crisis*).

“The most notorious nonselective equipment includes nets large enough to envelop twelve 747 airliners” (from a U.N. “Backgrounder” for Earth Summit +5 - Special Session of the General Assembly to review and appraise the implementation of Agenda 21; *The Agreement on High Seas Fishing - An Update*).

“At sea 200 miles southwest of Iceland last summer, the crew of a super-trawler big enough to contain a dozen Boeing 747 jumbo jets.... Each ship was trawling nets with opening circumferences of almost two miles; that’s the equivalent of 10 New York City blocks wide by two Empire State Buildings high.” (from *Vacuuming The Seas* by Dick Russell in the July/August 1996 E/The Environmental Magazine).

“...Trawlers large enough to contain several 747 aircraft...” (from Dr. Sylvia Earle’s preface to the National Resource Defense Council’s February, 1997 report *Hook, Line and Sinking, the crisis in marine fisheries*).

“Fishermen use some dastardly tricks to catch their pound of flesh. Legal drift nets are an incredible 2.5 kilometres in length, large enough to trap 12 Boeing 747 jets, but fishing boats are often suspected of using even bigger nets.” (from *The Vegetarian Winter* 1994/95 on the Animal Rights Resource Web site).

“...Huge factory trawlers that use environmentally destructive fishing technologies. Among these technologies are giant nets with mouths large enough to swallow several 747 jumbo jets....” (from the Chicago Tribune on January 27, 1998 in an article by Joshua Reichert of the Pew Charitable Trusts).

Back then there didn’t seem to be an anti-fishing claim that was too outrageous to make its way into the print or broadcast media, and the same holds true today. Hence the idea that bottom trawling is like clear cutting (not that there’s anything wrong with clear cutting when it’s done right) and millions of square miles of seafloor are “denuded” every year (see *Anatomy of an Anti-fishing Campaign* at <http://www.fishingnj.org/netusa6.htm>), that all of the larger fish have been fished out of the world’s oceans and we are now stuck with only the smaller species lower down on the food chain (see *Full of Sound and Fury, Signifying Nothing* at http://www.fishnet-usa.com/then_now.html), that the oceans will be bereft of fish by 2048 because of overfishing, and on and on and on.

There’s no fishing boat or fishing net that’s capable of catching or holding a Boeing 747, we’re not going to be eating krill, sardines and jellyfish in the future because that’s all that’s left, and we’re not going to catch all of the oceans’ fish in forty years. There are far more experts who will attest to this than to the sky-is-falling statements of the foundation-funded prophets of doom, but none of them are invited to participate in any of the phone-in national press briefings that invariably accompany the latest reports of impending oceanic catastrophe.

The difference between then and now

Before foundations established with mega-corporation funds discovered that just about any “fishing is bad” issue could be turned into a *cause célèbre*, the regularly recurring articles predicting the destruction of various fisheries seemed to have minimal impact on the fishing industry in general. The anti-fishing flames were often fanned by the media through uninformed reporting, but only relative to a particular issue/area, and cooler heads and more fully informed opinions usually prevailed.

Unfortunately, that is no longer the case. With tens of millions of foundation dollars at their disposal, the anti-fishing activists can afford to do a much better job of buying the scientists, spinning the facts and convincing the public and our elected officials that the manufactured fisheries crises that have been endemic in the public print and broadcast media for as long as those media have been in existence are actually real. The fishermen, the fish and the consuming public deserve a lot more than that.