

cod

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'It is a big difference living in a society that hunts whales and living in one that views them.' This is a concluding remark of the book. The implication is that Nature instead of being something truly wild and uncontrollable, becomes tame and recreational, reduced to parks. The very mystique of Nature as something both hostile and bountiful is gone, rather than being larger than us, it becomes smaller than us. Rather than something we have to protect ourselves against it becomes something we need to protect¹.

It became early on clear that man could not survive on hunting wild animals, instead meaty animals had to be domesticated and farmed. This provided a lot of meat increasing population even more. Of course for most of the history of mankind meat made up a very small part of the diet, the bulk of which was derived from grain, modern Western society is in this respect a historical anomaly. But the sea was different, it provided a seemingly inexhaustible supply, in particular of cod. The problem was not to harvest it, but to preserve and keeping it from spoiling. When it came to cod the northern method was to dry it, the southern was to salt it, and both were eventually combined making a staple food. It was the dried cod which made possible the extended Viking explorations through inhospitable regions, as well as making extended sea journeys in general feasible. The Basques were into cod, and in the Medieval times already they had found huge supplies, possible off Newfoundland, thus predating the discovery of the New World, as had the Vikings a few centuries before. In fact Newfoundland became the first overseas British colony, 'discovered' by John Cabot, originally Caboto, and like Columbus an Italian from Genova. In fact Newfoundland would be the last North American colony of the British, relinquished only just after the Second World War and becoming part of Canada. For a thousand years the inexhaustible supply of cod played a very important role in global economy, not the least in the infamous Slave trade, where inferior salted cod were shipped down to the West-Indies to supply cheap nourishment for the slaves. How come it lasted so long? Primitive technology is the answer. Until the beginning of the 20th century, the way Icelandic fishermen caught cod (and other fish) was not essentially different from the way the Vikings did it. Rather small scale and not very efficient, providing the Icelanders with a sustenance economy almost entirely based on fishing. With the 20th century came efficient trawlers, and it is noteworthy that in North America until fairly recently fishing vessels were driven by wind, especially the schooner, fast and efficient but as a result rather dangerous; while in Europe mechanization started much earlier. The seas knew no national boundaries and anyone could fish the North Sea, the waters off Iceland and Newfoundland (incidentally the two islands have about the same area and population in addition to being marked fishing economies). The two world wars were a godsend to the cod, as the appropriation of fishing fleets for navy purposes imposed a moratorium on

¹ I recall making those thoughts fifty years ago, although not formulated in such ways.

fishing by the belligerents. After the Second World War catches increased because of more efficient harvesting, and thus it took some time to realize the decline in population. The increased competition generated a desire to extend territorial waters. Iceland becoming independent after the Second World War extended its waters modestly from a three to a four mile limit, later to be extended to twelve than fifty and eventually two hundred, which now has become the norm. This led to clashes with England in the early sixties as well as in the seventies, the so called cod wars. That it did not lead to any casualties was a miracle according to the author. One consequence of the 200 mile limit is that some nations have no longer access to any commercially viable fishing grounds, such as the Spanish with its large fleet. In fact Spain is the largest consumer of fish in Europe putting it into a precarious situation.

The inexhaustible supplies of cod off Newfoundland has crashed, and unlike in earlier periods it is doubtful that it will ever recover, when the population plummets it changes the whole eco-system to which they are adapted, thus making recovery much harder, maybe even impossible. Cod has now changed from being a cheap staple, as I recall from childhood, to become a delicacy. It having constituted such an important part of the catch, its decline bordering to extinction has had wider ramification for catches in general. The decline in fishing and the enforced moratorium cause fishing communities to die and thus rupture traditions, which have been carried from fathers to sons for many generations, and which like all traditions cannot really be revived. But of course fishing is a dangerous business with the highest work related accidents of any vocation, not the least by drowning. What is the remedy? Farming, as has been done with salmon, seems a promising solution, especially as cod also seems amenable to such procedures. The problem is that any domesticated species is removed from natural selection and thus they become less and less flexible and adaptable and a nightmare is that some will escape and breed with the wild variety which will be weakened. But there may be so few wild cods alive that their genetic variety is not rich enough anyway to meet future demands. So thus, contrary to the wishful thinking of the fishing community, cod is inexorably on the road towards extinction, and not only it, but a host of other desirable fish species threaten to go the same way. In fact irreparable damage may have been done to the eco-systems of the oceans, no longer able to provide desirable catches. Too little has been done too late.

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