

**Review: The Fisherman's Frontier: People and Salmon in Southeast Alaska**

By David F. Arnold

Reviewed by David Jenkins

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Arnold, David F. *The Fishermen's Frontier: People and Salmon in Southeast Alaska*. Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2008. 296pp. ISBN 9780295987880. US\$35.00 cloth. Acid-free paper.

Ecosystems change quickly and dramatically with the introduction of humans, new technologies, or new ways of organizing labor. The problem for historians interested in how humans actively engage the natural world, as David Arnold demonstrates in this compelling book, is to remain focused on not only nature and culture, but the relationships between them. In this way, social history and environmental history become as entangled in analysis as they are in fact.

Arnold argues that, prior to the arrival of Europeans, indigenous peoples' (specifically, Tlingit and Haida) forms of exploiting Pacific salmon had the potential to damage salmon runs. Simple technologies—spears, wooden weirs, stone tidal traps—were remarkably effective for capturing salmon. Cultural practices, like ritual exchanges in the form of potlatches, and supernatural beliefs about animal spirits, mitigated long-term damage to salmon populations.

Yet it was indigenous notions of property and territory that were the most significant factors for management of salmon fisheries. Ownership of specific territories limited fishing access to clan-owned rivers and streams. The maintenance of sufficient salmon resources ensured a clan's prosperity and enhanced a clan leader's prestige. Control of construction and use, fish weirs and traps allowed a leader to indicate who should fish, with what, and where. Even if the long-term result was sustained salmon yields, these sorts of goals "were not 'ecological' in nature, but rather social and cultural" (p. 37).

Although native peoples doubtless overexploited salmon under certain circumstances, their defense of property rights and the environmental effects of territory ownership provided the social and ecological context for successful salmon management. This conclusion, Arnold notes, contradicts the commonly held stereotype of indigenous peoples living in harmony with the natural world. Tlingit and Haida resource management was founded upon a profound sense of ownership—of water, fish, land animals, plants, and specific territories.

As Arnold points out, the importance Euro-Americans ascribed to property ownership was directly contradicted by their notions of an "open-access" fishery, which, in contrast to indigenous beliefs, promoted the idea of common property, open to exploitation by any and all. With European arrival in southeastern Alaska, an open-access ideology coupled to a frontier mentality undermined local values of territoriality, allowed for new forms of industrial exploitation of salmon fisheries, and set the scene for prolonged conflict over salmon which continues to the present day.

The open-access fishery, however, was shot through with power relations, constrained by racial and ethnic identities, infused with gender inequalities, and, ultimately, failed. From Russian involvement in the late eighteenth century to American involvement in the nineteenth century to solidification of Alaska state control in the mid twentieth century, open access meant the diminishment of Indian exploitation of salmon resources, increased harvests, declining salmon populations, greater investment of capital in the form of canneries, boats, and fishing gear, and novel forms of human migration into the region. Arnold describes the social and cultural consequences of the complex mix of social, economic, and environmental relations, as the definition and use of the fishery shifted.

Salmon declines in the 1960s necessitated a break with past management practices. By 1973, open access ended with the passage of the Alaska Limited Entry Act, and new, capital-intensive, permit-holding fishermen emerged. The commons—or at least the ideal of the commons—no longer existed. The great irony is that a limited fishery, once practiced by indigenous peoples, now posed a threat to the existence of fishers who had originally developed the southeastern Alaska fishery. The new limited fishery, based not on territoriality and shared cultural values but on high-priced permits accessible only to a few, led to declining indigenous participation in both commercial and subsistence fishing. The hope was that it would also lead to rebounding salmon populations.

In the last two decades, part of that rebound has taken the form of Atlantic salmon raised in floating pens for the global market. These fish, bred for fast weight gain and tolerant of crowded conditions, pose the most recent environmental and social challenges to the region. Their long-term environmental effect—as escapees compete for food and spawning grounds or host common parasites and viruses—may prove more damaging to wild Pacific salmon than commercial fish traps or high-tech purse-seine boats. Atlantic salmon, and the markets they feed, will inevitably change social relations as well. As Arnold demonstrates, both Pacific and Atlantic salmon provide the occasion for further discussions about work, society, community, commerce, and our relationships with nature.

*The Fishermen's Frontier* is an exemplary book. Arnold describes with lively prose and careful detail the complex social and environmental relations involved in the changing salmon fishery in southeastern Alaska over 250 years. The general reader, as well as the specialist, will find *The Fishermen's Frontier* of great interest. It provides another example of the complex ways human labor conjoins nature and culture.

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