



## Little Hope for the Ugly Fish

**From the Antarctic to Granville Island, the toothfish symbolizes the ocean's plight.**

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Heard Island is a lost scrap of rock in the Southern Ocean, not that far from Antarctica. The chief value of this Australian possession is in the waters around it: a large, ugly creature, the Patagonian toothfish.

Demand for the toothfish has almost emptied the seas of it, even though it didn't arrive on the market until the 1970s. Chilean fishers spurned it as tasteless. But American marketers turned it into a popular replacement for cod and other fished-out species. Rebranded as "Chilean sea bass," it sells for up to \$20 a pound, and it's in great demand in good restaurants around the world.

In *Hooked: Pirates, Poaching, and the Perfect Fish*, G. Bruce Knecht tells the story of our collapsing fisheries in a single dramatic incident about the toothfish. In August 2003, an Australian customs vessel chased an Uruguayan pirate fishing boat halfway round Antarctica, from Heard Island to the South Atlantic. That sea chase, and its legal aftermath, shows how -- and why -- we're destroying the world's fisheries.

The main thread of this story starts with the detection of the pirate boat, *Viarsa*, fishing illegally off Heard Island. The fishing was good, precisely because Heard Island was protected. Internationally open fishing grounds are already exhausted. The Australians aboard *Southern Supporter* ordered the boat to stop. Instead, it ran.

What followed was a chase across thousands of kilometres of stormy seas. Before it ended, Uruguay and Australia were locked in an international incident. The Australians dragged South Africa into the dispute by hiring private security men from Cape Town to rendezvous with them and to board and seize *Viarsa*. The Australians then sailed *Viarsa* back to Western Australia to try its crew.

### **From Heard Island to Granville Island**

Knecht weaves this narrative into a larger account of the world's fishing industry and the mostly futile efforts of governments to discourage the plundering of one species after another.

For fishers and their communities, the stakes are enormous: huge payoffs and the continuation of a centuries-old way of life. As Knecht portrays *Viarsa's* crew, they simply can't imagine a sea without fish. Some are already planning to go after the Antarctic toothfish when its Patagonian cousins have vanished.

Bringing the issue very close to home, Knecht adds a third strand by taking us on a tour of the fish market on Granville Island, in the company of [Daniel Pauly](#).

Pauly, the head of the University of B.C.'s [Fisheries Centre](#), is a major scholar in fisheries science. He dismisses a retailer's claim that cod and snapper are "local." He also dismisses industry claims that the fisheries are generally OK. A few are indeed OK, says Pauly. But most are essentially catching more fish than can be replaced.

Given this bleak perspective, we resume Knecht's story of pursuit and justice. The conclusion is frustrating: The pirates are free to plunder the ocean again, and it becomes easy to believe that the world's fisheries really will be [gone by 2048](#).

### **Agreement, solutions are elusive**

There are contrary voices, of course. Ray Hilborn, a fisheries biologist at the University of Washington, recently [condemned that warning as "bogus"](#); he's also quoted in *Hooked* as calling Pauly "consistently negative." But that doesn't mean we shouldn't remedy our problems.

Pauly's solution is to set up "marine protection areas" where fishing is absolutely forbidden and fish can rebuild their numbers undisturbed. The Antarctic seas would be one such no-go zone.

But *Hooked* is persuasive evidence of how hard it would be to police such areas, and how intense the pressure would be to open them up again. Like the war on drugs, the war on fish pirates would continue as long as demand persisted for the product. As Knecht's book demonstrates, we are indeed hooked -- by our infinite hunger for a clearly finite resource.

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