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REVIEW

3 Ocean Books Reviewed: No Good News and a Fair Amount of Bad

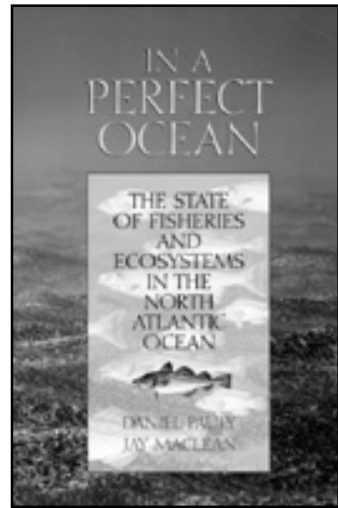
by Multiple Authors
Reviewed by BEN NEAL

The Empty Ocean: Plundering the World's Marine Life
By Richard Ellis
Washington, D.C.: Island Press/
Shearwater Books
www.islandpress.org

In a Perfect Ocean: The State of Fisheries and Ecosystems in the North Atlantic Ocean
By Daniel Pauly and Jay Maclean
Washington, D.C.: Island Press/
Shearwater Books
www.islandpress.org

Hierarchical Perspectives on Marine Complexities: Searching for Systems in the Gulf of Maine
By Spencer Apollonio
New York, N.Y.: Columbia University Press
www.columbia.edu/cu/cup

These three books lay out the health of the sea around us, and the picture is not good. Like a full medical report, or perhaps a little more like an autopsy at times, our front yard, the Gulf of Maine, is presented as a very weary patient. In Pauly and Maclean's book the Gulf is described as having seen a depopulation of most of its large marine animals; Apollonio reveals that the reduction in the iconic codfish might have been a result of our essential misunderstanding of the workings of the ocean ecosystem; and as for The Empty Ocean, well, the name speaks for itself. Students of marine biology, fishermen, environmental advocates and even connoisseurs of chowder should all take note, if they have not already, that not only have great changes been wrought in the makeup and number of fishes and



Other Reviews:
[A Handmade Life: In Search of Simplicity](#)
by William S. Coperthwaite

[Far east down east: Maine's freshest foods spiced with Asia's finest flavors](#)
by Bruce deMustchine

[The Island's True Child](#)
by Dorothy Simpson

[The New Legal Sea Foods Cookbook](#)
by Berkowitz; Doerfer

[2 Books Reviewed: Cape Cod's Lesson for Maine](#)
by Multiple Authors

[Waiting for Time](#)
by Bernice Morgan

[Random Passage](#)
by Bernice Morgan

[Slow Monkeys and other stories](#)
by Jim Nichols

animals (which most everyone knew already), but also that these changes may have far longer lasting and more disruptive effects than we have imagined so far. The rolling, dark Gulf of Maine itself is perhaps a metaphor for our understanding and ability to preserve the health of the seas, in that the harder you look into it, the deeper it seems, and mysterious interactions can be hidden in the depths. One thing is clear from this trio of books, that the waters off our shores are not like they used to be, and we humans are the cause of the change.

In *The Empty Ocean*, author and marine artist (the book is illustrated with a nice series of his somewhat scientific-looking black-and-white drawings of the species involved) Richard Ellis documents the condition of some 30-odd animals, from the lowly menhaden to the aged leatherback sea turtle, and from the massive elephant seal to the extinct Great Auk. He documents their often-sad stories one after another, and with each one it becomes apparent that this crisis has been some time in coming. One is also left with the startling feeling that this is still happening on our watch. Through numerous facts and historical stories, *The Empty Ocean* conveys an awe and interest in the animals profiled, while also making the point that they would not be in this book unless they have been actively killed at some time by mankind.

In *A Perfect Ocean* narrows the scope to just the North Atlantic, outlines in scientific detail the fish population declines since 1900 (the loss is roughly a factor of ten), gives the probable causes, and makes solid recommendations for recovery. This willingness to lay out the tough choices needed in black-and-white numerical terms is as awakening as a bad bank statement. In the current environment of searching for ways to reduce the groundfish catches without dislocating traditional fishermen, it is sobering to note the empirical recommendation of reducing groundfish fishing effort by a factor of four, right here in our neighborhood. One of the strongest take-home messages is that we are on the end of a five-hundred-year-long fishing spree, and if we want a change anytime in the future, the time for strong action is right now. Of special interest to Mainers is the mention of the New England lobster fishery as one of the better-managed and healthy examples of area fisheries.

For those who want a structural understanding of how

[No Great Mischief](#)

by Alistair
MacLeod

[Island: The
Complete Stories](#)

by Alistair
MacLeod

we might have gone wrong in managing our local marine resources, and who have a series of long winter nights and the intellectual stamina to stay the course, Hierarchical Perspectives on Marine Complexities reveals some of the leading ecological thought on our marine system. This is a dense little book, and I dare say if one read and truly understood the entire volume then you would truly know more than I about this problem. Author Spencer Apollonio has been one of Maine's most successful marine managers, holding top spots in both Maine and regional organizations, and he pulls no punches in delving into the enormous complexity of the inter-species interactions, along with the anthropogenic forces distorting those systems. This book ends without stated recommendations for fisheries management, which is a little frustrating for the reader, but that in itself shows one of the main points of the book, namely that managing the Gulf of Maine back to anything resembling historical levels of production and health will just simply not be easy.

-- December 2003

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