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OPINION

## Trawling for survival

Can the wisdom of some of our great spiritual and intellectual giants help cure our ailing fisheries?

*Douglas Todd, Religion and Ethics Columnist Vancouver Sun*

What would Plato, Buddha and Jesus do about Canada's dwindling fish stocks?

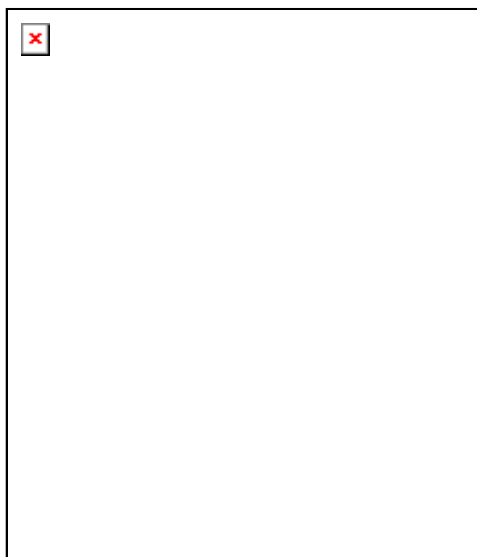
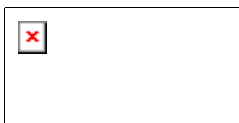
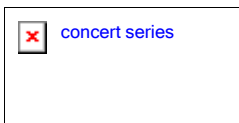
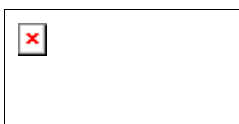
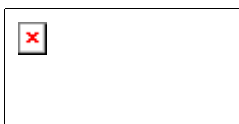
This is not a joke. A federal research body, with the support of religious groups, has just spent more than \$150,000 finding an answer to this unusual question.

Their surprising conclusions may provide a model for resolving the crisis in fishing, where stocks of salmon, cod, lobster, shrimp and herring on Canada's west and east coasts are threatened by a devastatingly effective high-technology industry.

Sounding almost comical in its eclecticism, the team studying the dilemma includes environmentalists, economists, biologists from the department of fisheries and oceans, artists, philosophers and religious thinkers. Together they recently published a book that links the multi-billion-dollar business of fishing with the often-ethereal heights of ethics and spirituality.

The cross-Canada research project is the brainchild of Prof. Harold Coward, who heads the Centre for Religion and Society at the University of Victoria. The team has produced a book titled *Just Fish: Ethics and Canadian Marine Fisheries (ISER)*, edited by Coward, Maritimes-rooted social scientist Rosemary Ommert and UBC fish biologist Tony Pitcher.

The title *Just Fish* is a double entendre, referring to the prevailing attitude that salmon, cod et. al. are "just fish" -- dumb things to be exploited. The title also suggests the need to be more ethical about how we treat once-



**Pam Hall. From *Just Fish: Ethics and Canadian Marine Fisheries / (Everyone has a right to catch their own dignity... We may have had that right for centuries, but now it has become an inconvenient right.)***

bountiful oceans, which Ommer says are in danger of being strip-mined of fish and turned into "plankton soup." We need to be more "just" about fish.

Believe it or not, federal officials have been converted to the approach. "It took some time for some of the DFO scientists to understand what ethics had to do with fish," Coward says. But now, he says, they're hooked, so to speak.

But why would the Unitarian Church, Atlantic Episcopal Assembly, Catholic archdioceses of Vancouver and Victoria and the United Church of Canada help UVic, UBC and Newfoundland's Memorial University research the ethics of fishing?

Religious people are disturbed, like many, about the future of once-proud families in dying coastal communities. They've heard the stories about how a father and his child could easily catch a coho only a decade ago off Bowen Island -- and now it takes a minor miracle. The churches, as well, fear humans are wreaking incurable damage on God's creation.

Coward and others discovered the world's ancient religions offer ethical guidance for our peculiarly modern ecological emergency.

They found Buddhism saying that, since everything exists in interdependence, we need to give up our selfishness and protect the Earth, since we can't live without it. Similarly, Taoism sees nature as part of human's existence "and thus humans must learn to respect the rhythms and life cycle of the migrating salmon."

Hinduism teaches God is immanent in all things, and since God is present in fish, we have to think twice about misusing them. A similar ethic of respect for nature resides in native Indian spirituality. Islam, meanwhile, portrays nature as good, not corrupted -- and fish as part of Allah's creation, which is marked by beauty.

Since Canada is a multicultural society, Coward believes we need to know what different faiths might have to say about how we should treat nature because our public policy is based on religious pluralism. It's easier to get Hindus, for example, concerned about the well-being of fish if you can show them their scriptures would want them to be.

Religion remains a powerful influence for Canadians, particularly the majority steeped in the Judeo-Christian tradition. That's why Just Fish stresses relevant biblical lessons.

Coward and his team are especially drawn to the biblical ideal of the Sabbath, the day of rest and reflection, which suggests regularly giving fish a reprieve from human predators. They also favour the notion of jubilee, a Hebrew ideal that focuses on restoring relationships with people and the Earth -- and by extension, the seas. They envision more marine protected areas.

What, then, can Plato and other great philosophers contribute to the discussion of fishing?

Plato said justice implies harmony in society and nature. As a result, Just Fish concludes justice means protecting the ecosystem's delicate balance. Meanwhile, Aristotle taught that economic justice means the narrow interests of an individual, like a commercial fish boat owner, may count less than the needs of larger society.

Just Fish suggests even Europe's most famous market economist, Adam Smith, would tend to agree with these ancient Greeks that self-restraint is necessary when it comes to fish. As Smith said in the 18th century: "Man ought to regard himself not as something separated and detached, but as a citizen of the world, a member of the vast commonwealth of nature -- and to the interest of this great community, he ought at all times be willing that his own little interest should be sacrificed."

Underpinned by such high-minded values, the Just Fish team explains in detail how the ethic of justice can be brought to the ecosystem; to the fair distribution of fish; to the sustainable production of sea creatures, and to the restoration of the once-teeming oceans.

Finally, Just Fish analyses 41 fisheries and concludes that, on balance, those on the East Coast are run more ethically than those on the West Coast, where seiners can capture entire schools of fish at a time and groundfish nets are allowed to drag the sea floor.

On a positive note, Just Fish also judges the most ethical single fishing operation in Canada to be the current West Coast herring fishery run by the Haida. After helping almost destroy the fishery in the 1960s, the Haida have now adopted a more conservative harvesting policy that's bringing back the herring. And a sense of fishing ethics.

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Douglas Todd's column appears weekly.

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