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**Essay**

# A Fish Tale

**By PAUL GREENBERG**

A few months ago I took the most expensive nap of my life, and when it was over I decided it was all Hemingway's fault. For $500, I booked a marlin charter out of Kailua-Kona, Hawaii. I had never gone for the really big fish, and I was juiced to finally get the chance. I imagined myself sitting, like Papa, on the deck of the Pilar, fighting the big fish in the big chair, muttering through gritted teeth the great man's motto "Il faut (d'abord) durer" — first, one must endure.

But after hours of dragging footlong lures at 8 knots, I began thinking that it could be the big fish that have not endured. Not a single marlin raised its sword to our lines, nor did one appear for the other 30-odd boats trolling in the lee of the trade winds that day. And as I nodded off in the fighting chair and recalled the photographs of Hemingway posed with giant marlin and tuna, I started wondering whether it was possible to calculate the effect the world's best fishing writer might have had on the world's biggest fish.

The thought wouldn't have occurred to me a few years ago. Like Hemingway, I took up fishing because of the limitlessness the sea seemed to offer. I shared his notion that the "great ocean currents are the last wild country there is left," and believed of the sea as Hemingway did that "no one knows what fish live in it, or how great size they reach." As a child, if I ever felt guilty

about my kills, I summoned a kind of waking dream in which all my victims thanked me. “There were too many of us,” the fish would say. “Thanks for making room.” Santiago, in “The Old Man and the Sea,” ruminates similarly. “You loved him when he was alive and you loved him after,” he says to himself while contemplating the killing of the enormous marlin. “If you love him, it is not a sin to kill him. Or is it more?”

But in 2003 the journal Nature published an article that made killing fish seem even more sinful. Analyzing catch data over the last half-century, the biologists Boris Worm and Ransom Myers determined that the populations of the large blue-water fish — notably marlin, swordfish, tuna and sharks — had declined by 90 percent worldwide. This paper has been bitterly disputed, but it was enough to make me pause and look for someone to blame.

How much of the big fishes’ decline is Hemingway’s fault? Like many tales that come from the sea, the facts are of a liquid nature. Hemingway was a frequent but inconsistent record keeper. In his archive room at the John F. Kennedy library in Boston, the numbers are there, sort of. During one 180-day stretch in 1933-34, the Pilar logs reveal a catch of 10 marlin, 2 sailfish and 9 sharks. But in an article in Esquire describing the typically slower spring run of that same year, Hemingway said the Pilar’s catch was 51 marlin.

These discrepancies were noted in Hemingway’s time. Joseph Knapp, the publisher of Colliers and a fisherman himself, accused him of overstating his catches. (According to the authors of “Hemingway in Cuba,” “you big fat slob” were the last words Papa endured before laying Knapp out on a Bimini dock.) Later, perhaps in an effort to avoid similar conflicts, Hemingway helped found the International Game Fish Association, which is recognized as the world’s most objective keeper of fishing records.

Accusations and counterpunches aside, there are ways to approximate Hemingway’s kills. In

the archive, I counted every photograph of Hemingway posed with an oceanic alpha predator. In all, I could make out 109 individual animals — 82 marlin, 21 bluefin tuna and 6 sailfish. Based on my own experience, I would venture that an avid fisherman tends to photograph about one in every 10 fish boated (the other nine being too small to justify the cost of film and the delay of cocktails). The one-in-10 figure jibes roughly with Hemingway's (and not Knapp's) assertions. Between 1932 and 1934, he claims to have caught 91 total marlin, giving a rounded-down average of 40 per season. From 1933 (when he caught his first big marlin) to 1960 (when he left Cuba for good), Hemingway found himself in tropical waters for roughly 25 fishing seasons. If we assume an average annual catch of 40 fish and a ratio of four marlin to every tuna, that would make for something like 800 marlin and 200 bluefin tuna. (Shark kills are harder to calculate because most of them happened when the author strafed them indiscriminately with a Thompson submachine gun.)

Though primarily a catch-and-keep kind of angler, Hemingway was known to release some fish. If we charitably assume that he freed half of his 1,000 big-game fish (a third of which, according to scientists at the National Marine Fisheries Service, would have died after release because of the punishing effects of Hemingway-era "J-hooks"), we can say that roughly 530 marlin and 130 bluefin tuna died at Papa's hands. Because we're talking about really big fish here, I'll eliminate the smaller white and striped marlin and set his total at 250 blue marlin. And since he was more often in Cuban marlin water than in the tuna water off Bimini, I'll halve his bluefin total too. (It's possible a more exact figure could be found by poring over the thousands of pages of Hemingway's nearly unintelligible scrawl, but, to repurpose the words of the great man himself, "try to do this out of the money you finagle out of publishers and editors.")

So how many blue marlin and bluefin tuna would that be today if those fish had lived to

reproduce? No one knows exactly how fertile the big fish are. Ah, the unknowable sea! According to fisheries service scientists, an adult blue marlin and bluefin tuna may produce anywhere from several million to several hundred million eggs in their lifetimes. One-millionth to one 10-millionth of those eggs may live to become adult spawners. So if we take a conservative stab at that very indeterminate number and say one 10-millionth of every 50 million eggs becomes a spawning female, we can venture that each Hemingway kill might have produced five spawners. Multiply that over the four generations that would have lived and died since Hemingway's time, and you have about 78,000 blue marlin and 18,000 bluefin tuna.

This, it turns out, is significant in comparison with today's depleted population. According to the fisheries service, there may be only 100,000 to 400,000 adult blue marlin and 20,000 to 30,000 adult bluefin tuna in the western Atlantic. The biologist and writer Carl Safina believes there may be even fewer than 10,000 bluefin left, and is suing to close the fish's spawning grounds to commercial long-lining.

So can we blame Hemingway for inflicting terminal damage on these species? Not directly. Hemingway lived in a period when estimations of ocean fisheries went from limitless to limited. And it's doubtful, given the rise of modern industrial fishing, that the animals he killed would have lived to spawn so many heirs. In the 1930s, when Hemingway learned to catch bluefin, the species was barely pursued commercially. Those caught were ground up for pet food. Today industrial long-liners set millions of hooks that catch tens of thousands of tuna and marlin every year. The tuna sell for upward of $100,000 apiece. The marlin, not the tastiest of fish, are mostly dumped overboard dead.

But we can blame Hemingway for some of the damage others are still doing. Despite the havoc wreaked on the big fish by commercial fishermen, sport anglers still want that Hemingway

photo: standing next to a giant fish, hanging a casual hand on the animal's lifeless dorsal fin. Today, every animal strung up for a picture is another animal that can't contribute to the rebuilding of these species. The fisheries service estimates that in American waters, 23 percent of the total bluefin tuna killed by fishermen are killed for sport.

With each passing generation, not just the number of fish in the sea but also the number of fish the public thinks should be in the sea diminishes. This phenomenon, encapsulated by the fisheries biologist Daniel Pauly's term "shifting baselines," allows us to adjust to a depleted ocean without quite knowing what's slipping away. Hemingway, however, did the service of fixing the big fish in time. With his writing, he drew a line in the sea beyond which our perceived baseline cannot wander too far. Thanks in large part to him, we know that not so long ago it was normal to catch many big marlin and tuna within sight of shore. And for that alone we should praise the old man. If he had never given us a glimpse of that seemingly limitless ocean, we might never have realized how much we have lost.

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