

ENVIRONMENT

Finny finis?

TUNA

A Love Story
By Richard Ellis
Knopf, 336 pages, \$26.95

WHO KILLED THE GRAND BANKS?

By Alex Rose
Wiley, 204 pages, \$36.95

THE LAST FISH TALE

By Mark Kurlansky
Ballantine, 304 pages, \$28

REVIEWED BY TARAS GRESCOE

In the last three years, I've read 117 books about fish, fishermen and the oceans.

I've plowed through whistle-blowing journalistic screeds, among them Charles Clover's *The End of the Line* and Paul Molyneaux's *Swimming in Circles*. I've read such elegiac examples of *belles lettres* as M. F. K. Fisher's *Consider the Oyster* and John McPhee's *The Founding Fish*. I've revisited the Monterey of Steinbeck's *Cannery Row* and the New Bedford of Melville's *Moby-Dick*. And I've enjoyed inspired ecological tracts by gifted scientists, from Rachel Carson's *The Sea Around Us* (1961) to Daniel Pauly's *In a Perfect Ocean* (2003).

In the process, I have become adept at scanning the declining tonnages in tables of catches, and following the plummeting lines in FAO graphs of the world's swordfish and tuna fisheries. Submerged in oceanic clichés about the bulldozing of coral reefs and the strip-mining of sea mounts, I have become inured to chapters titled *Net Loss*, *Fished Out* and *Sea Change*.

All of these books turn out to be chapters in the same volume. It is a multigenerational, continent-spanning tale with a narrative arc as relentless as anything written by Hardy or Zola, one that documents the decline of the oceans from a recent past of prelapsarian plenty to a near-future of unimaginable barrenness.

The storyline of this saga is simple, the facts stark. The action starts on the North At-

lantic 200 years ago, when pre-industrial fishing communities relying on wooden-hulled vessels and sail power exploited, but did not seriously deplete, the oceans as a source of food. The change comes in increments, with the adoption (often to fierce local opposition) of bottom-trawlers, well boats and steam engines. Even as the first populations of flatfish are being fished to local extinction, and the fishermen of Whitby and Grimsby are forced north to Iceland, Victorian hubris and hyperbole hold that human effort can never seriously affect the world's "cod mountains" and endlessly self-renewing salmon rivers.

The industrial techniques pioneered on the North Sea are exported to the Grand Banks, the North Pacific and Asia. Stern trawlers the size of destroyers, purse-seiners that can encircle a dozen nuclear submarines, sonar, spotter planes, GPS and DuPont's nylon monofilament netting become the norm. Equipped with the latest technology, the fishing fleets of the world become armadas facing enemies with brains the size of chickpeas.

By the turn of the millennium, 90 per cent of the world's predator fish — tuna, sharks, swordfish — have been removed from the ocean; leading marine ecologists to project that, because of pollution, climate change and overfishing, all the world's major fisheries will collapse within the next 50 years. The saga ends where it began, in North Atlantic fishing towns, where the locals are reduced to catching slime eels and tourists in search of the quaint get served farmed-in-China tilapia at local seafood shacks.

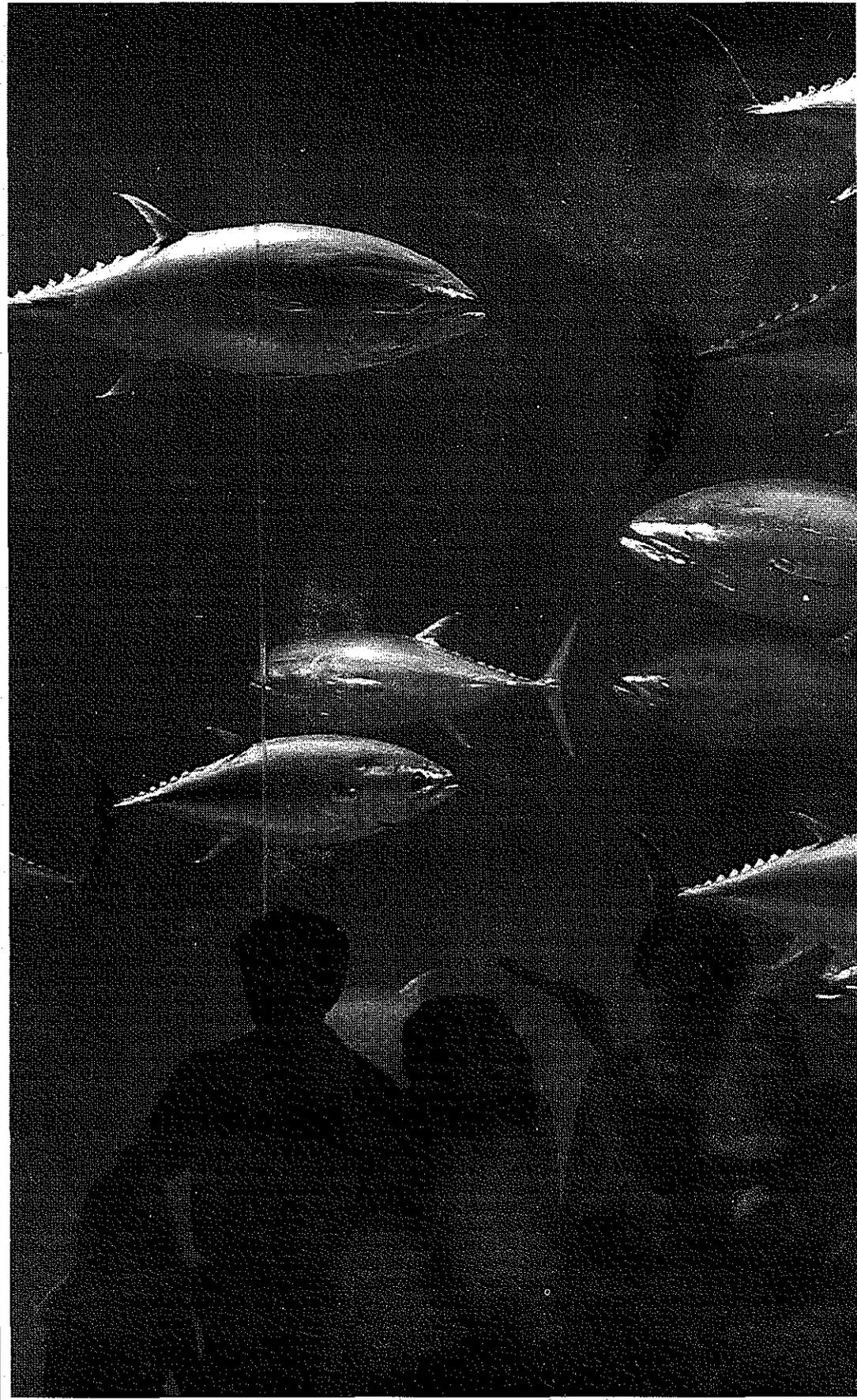
Three recently published books interpolate new chapters into this wretched saga, and each author has opted to approach the story in a different way. Richard Ellis, a prolific U.S. author who specializes in well-illustrated works of natural history, has opted for the single-species

approach (c.f. Mark Kurlansky's *Cod* and David Montgomery's *King of Fish*, the latter a coronation of salmon). In *Tuna: A Love Story*, the focus is necessarily global: These overgrown members of the mackerel family historically ranged from Norway to the Azores, have been known to cross the Pacific, and, thanks to the international tuna ranching industry, are now common off the shores of Libya and Australia.

The particular object of the author's affection is *Thunnus thynnus*, and in the bluefin he has chosen a worthy inamorata. Forget those six-ounce cans of Chicken of the Sea: bluefins are warm-blooded sea wolves that hunt in high-speed parabolas to concentrate their prey, have a pineal organ that acts as a "third eye" sensitive even to weak moonlight, and can dive to 3,300 feet and attain weights of 1,500 pounds. Ellis documents how early sports fishermen, including Michael Lerner, who fished off Wedgeport, N.S., would strap themselves into wooden dories and be taken on hours-long Nantucket sleigh rides by these half-ton predators.

The heroic age of the fair fight with bait and tackle and harpoons fades with the globalization of markets, when the fishermen of Atlantic Canada and New England realize that the Japanese are willing to pay mega-yen for *toro*, the fatty belly of the fish they had, until the 1970s, been selling for dog food. Fishermen start using spotter planes and purse seines, and sending their catch abroad in wooden "coffins" on direct Japan Air Line flights.

Ellis makes the obligatory pilgrimage to the tuna auctions at Tokyo's Tsukiji Market — which he describes, aptly, as a "fifty-six acre bento box" — and visits the tuna ranches of South Australia, where juvenile bluefin are towed inshore and fattened in cages with Pacific sardines. This form of aquaculture will probably be the death of the bluefin: The World Conserva-



Tuna at the Tokyo Sea Life Park: Ninety per cent of the world's predator fish have been removed from the ocean, lea



ing to projections that all the world's major fisheries will collapse within the next 50 years. TORU HANA/REUTERS

tion Union has already listed them as critically endangered.

In a footnote, the author criticizes Farley Mowat's *Sea of Slaughter* for not providing a single bibliographic cross-reference. If anything, Ellis errs on the side of overdocumentation: his third chapter is bogged down by cladistic controversies over the distinctions between tuna species; some of the book's best writing comes in the form of long passages from Zane Grey, Carl Safina and other admirers of the Scombridae family. But Ellis's *Love Story* is full of essential new information, and contributes a fascinating chapter to the overfishing saga.

Another approach restricts the focus to a single ocean (think of Terry Glavin's excellent *The Last Great Sea*, about the North Pacific), or a specific fishery – which is what Vancouver-based journalist Alex Rose has chosen to do in *Who Killed the Grand Banks?* The question deserves to be asked, but Rose, in spite of the fact that he has done his legwork in visiting Newfoundland, can't seem to keep his focus. Chapters on the extermination of the Beothuks, offshore oil and threats to wild Pacific salmon only distract from what should have been the main thrust of this mystery: determining the identity of those responsible for the sudden collapse of the world's greatest food fishery in the early 1990s.

The answer, we learn very early on, is that Newfoundlanders themselves killed the Grand Banks. Rose quotes John Crosbie and local fishermen blaming foreigners, seals and "oceanographic phenomena," and ultimately links a local dictum – "If it runs, walks or flies, kill it" – to the disappearance of both the Beothuk and the cod.

Rose's prose suffers from repetition and some of his interviews are questionable (the last chapter dwells on the opinions of a black-clad property appraiser met over a skim-milk latte in St. John's), but his book is worth reading

for the insight it offers into the culture of the Department of Fisheries and Oceans, for whom he worked as a public relations flack in the mid-1980s. Rose portrays a department afflicted by a tribal mentality, in which crucial science was suppressed and great scientists like the late Ransom Myers, who eventually went to Dalhousie, were intimidated when their findings threatened to embarrass the minister.

I have come to believe that the greatest chapters in the fisheries saga – the enduring classics of the literature – are the ones that focus on communities of fishermen. William Warner memorably portrayed the threatened watermen of Chesapeake Bay in *Beautiful Swimmers*, and Trevor Corson caught the minutiae of fishing life in Maine while working as a commercial lobsterman in *The Secret Life of Lobsters*. In *The Last Fish Tale*, Mark Kurlansky, New York-based author of such commodity histories as *Cod* and *Salt*, has decided to stay put and explore a single place – in this case, a small but culturally rich fishing port that can be seen from Boston on a clear day.

Canadians know Gloucester, Mass., as the Yankee enclave that tried (and usually failed) to build schooner fleet enough to defeat Lunenburg's Bluenose. In his genteel, evenly cadenced prose, dappled with line drawings, historical photos and recipes, Kurlansky paints a portrait of a coastal utopia of "Portagees" and Sicilians, of *linguica* and *cannolis*, where the fishermen read Shakespeare and visiting painters such as Edward Hopper and Winslow Homer got their feet wet limning pinkies, ketches and dories.

It is, as all such stories are, a melancholy tale. Afflicted by industrialization, the city's fishermen fished out first the cod, for fish sticks (Clarence Birdseye manufactured his first fish sticks in Gloucester), then skate for Parisian bistros, then dogfish for Lon-

don's chippies, and finally even hagfish for the Korean market.

Kurlansky is best when he respects unity of place – the book loses focus in side-trips to Newlyn in Cornwall and Collioure and St-Jean-de-Luz in the Basque country – but he eventually returns to a contemporary Gloucester, threatened by gentrification, where bottom feeders like lobster are about all that's left to catch.

Like so many who have written on the fisheries, all three authors propose solutions. Rose suggests turning the Grand Banks into a giant marine protected area, and quotes a fisheries official who thinks the only hope for the cod, should they ever reappear, is to start again with a traditional, 18th-century fishery. (Rose also makes the case for individual transferable quotas in the Pacific salmon fishery, a privatization of the commons that has led to consolidation in the hands of a few major players in the Alaskan crab fishery.) Ellis argues for a moratorium on bluefin fishing. Kurlansky quotes a federal marine biologist who would like to see Gloucester once again become "a forest of masts."

The implication is that by limiting fishing effort, by losing the spotter planes and industrial-size stern trawlers, we could return to a relatively recent, low-tech past of healthy oceans and strong coastal communities. (That is not likely to happen, alas, in Newfoundland's outports: The cod's place in the food chain may have been permanently usurped by smaller fish.) Given the way fuel prices are going, fishermen worldwide may be well-advised to get reacquainted with Gloucester's postcard-perfect past of sail-powered day boats and schooners.

» Montreal writer Taras Grescoe read those 117 fish books as research for *Bottomfeeder: How to Eat Ethically in a World of Vanishing Seafood*, his own contribution to the saga. He has now read 120.