

# The Planned Depletion of Fish Stocks

About: *Carmel Finley, All the Boats on the Ocean. How Government Subsidies Led to Global Overfishing*,  
University of Chicago Press

By *Étienne Peyrat*

---

**The depletion of global fish resources is less the result of anarchic trends affecting the oceans than of coordinated, government-supported policies aimed at industrializing fishing and maximizing catches. Instrumental to this predation are armadas of factory ships.**

---

It is in a fishing port—in Europe, Asia, or North America—that one must begin reading this book. This port is home to the book's main characters: factory ships which, since their rise in the 1930s, have made possible the overexploitation afflicting maritime resources across the world. While fisheries' global volume rose to 86.4 million tons in 1996, it has since experienced precarious stagnation, despite various strategies for preserving catches.<sup>1</sup> But while it takes note of this dramatic depletion, the book is primarily interested in its origins. Its questions are those that might be asked by an observer of our port: where do these ships come from? Who built them? Who equipped them and turned them into full-fledged sea predators?

---

<sup>1</sup> On this point, one notes a discrepancy between Finley's data, which refers to a decline from 86.4 million tons in 1996 to 74.4 million in 2010, and the official statistics of the FAO.

In the English-speaking world, Finley is a major figure in sea research. Her work lies at the crossroads of activism and science. For years she has developed an analytical framework that traces the multiple paths through which the machinery of overexploitation has come into place. In 2011, she devoted a book to the concept of maximum sustainable yield, in which she showed how the oceanographic sciences were used to consolidate an international system of fisheries blind to their own effects.<sup>2</sup> In her new study, the focus shifts to industrial fishing fleets and understanding their birth and development. Central to Finley's argument is the idea that governments have played a major role in creating the fishing industry, for geopolitical and political reasons as well as economic ones.

## The Birth of the Factory Ship

Factory ships acquired cachet—if the word is even appropriate—in the late 1920s, when the Japanese proletarian writer Takiji Kobayashi (1903-1933) dedicated a short story to them. This story was rediscovered in the 2000s and is now available in English.<sup>3</sup> This text, which describes the ship as well as the fisher-laborers who work aboard it, depicts in somber tones the transformation of Japanese fishing during the interwar period. By recounting the social and physical violence taking place on these ships as they sailed along the coasts of Japan and the Kamchatka Peninsula, Kobayashi presents the emergence of an industrial conception of fishing against a background of growing geopolitical rivalries.

Japan, which in 1931 had thirteen factory ships, was ahead of the industrialization of fishing globally. These ships remained, of course, a tiny minority of Japan's hundreds of thousands of vessels and million and a half fishers. But they shaped the prospects of the entire industry: at the technical level, by embodying the possibilities of canning, until the invention of frozen fish in the early 1950s further expanded the potential market; and at the geographical level, as the primary mission of these vessels was to travel to new spaces that Japan sought to conquer for its fisheries. Already strongly present in southeast Asia, Japan, from 1933 to 1934, threw

---

<sup>2</sup> Carmel Finley, *All the Fish in the Sea: Maximum Sustainable Yield and the Failure of Fisheries Management*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2011.

<sup>3</sup> Takiji Kobayashi, *The Crab Cannery Ship and Other Novels of Struggle*, trans. Cipris, Zeljko, University of Hawaii Press, 2013.

itself into the conquest of Central and Latin America, before introducing whale fishing into the Antarctic.

In the rise of industrial fishing, Finley emphasizes the crucial role played by government authorities, who had several aspirations for fishing: that it could feed growing populations by diversifying their diet and project strength across the globe. The international growth of these industrial fleets really begins at the end of the Second World War. Finley does not analyze the development of the entire industry and her story remains, in this respect, rather American-centric.<sup>4</sup> The book does, however, provide some pointers for tracking the parallel development of the world's major fleets: between 1956 and 1975, the Soviet Union built no less than 5,400 long-distance fishing ships, in an effort to raise itself into the top ranks of global fishing.

## **The Cold War's Armadas**

The technical narrative of how these fleets were built is not, however, the core of the book's argument, which gives sustained attention to the geopolitical context in which they developed. One of the stories the book follows most closely concerns the special relationship forged during the Second World War between the United States and Iceland. As a major base for American troops between the summer of 1941 and June 1946, Iceland was profoundly transformed, in ways that offer a striking parallel with the Pacific Islands, where US troops were also stationed. Iceland's fishing industry grew rapidly and obtained significant duty concessions thanks to a 1943 bilateral accord. Icelandic tuna became a factor in political alliances, a fact that was not lost on the Soviets, who, in 1946, in an effort to rally the island to their cause, offered to buy its entire fish output for the following year.

Subsequently, fishing concerns remained central to major diplomatic considerations. Finley proposes a maritime interpretation of the story, the broad strokes of which are well known, of the renewed alliance between Japan and the United States after 1945. This partnership meant that Washington would once again take responsibility for defending the archipelago's maritime interests. In this way, American authorities decided, in opposition to their own industrialists' interests, to

---

<sup>4</sup> This bias, which is shared by much of so-called "global" English-language history, can be explained in part by the special importance given to American professional and scientific archives, located at the Scripps Institution of Oceanography in San Diego.

ensure that Japanese fishing exports would receive favorable trade advantages as a way of securing the security treaty signed in September 1951, in the middle of the Korean War. Beginning in 1948, American occupation authorities in Japan even supervised these exports.

The example of the Japanese alliance brings Finley's main argument into focus. By invoking the primacy of government policy in the production of fishing fleets, it is not referring solely to states' promotion of *their own fleets*. While this may have been true of the Soviets, the United States, to the contrary, seems to have been willing to accept the decline of the fishing industry on its own territory in order to secure geopolitical alliances with foreign states. The federal government closed its eyes on the tax and trade devices that allowed Japan to transform, in Samoa, what it caught in the South Pacific, profiting, in this way, from a favorable customs' regime. This practice strengthened the United States' sway over this string of Pacific islands as the Soviets gradually developed a global fleet—a phenomenon that, in the 1970s, had a military counterpart.<sup>5</sup> The active diplomacy that Japan pursued to guarantee its fishing spaces thus occurred under the umbrella of American patronage.

## Of Fish and Law

If Tokyo needed this policy—which depended, notably, on bilateral fishing agreements, which grew in number from eleven in the 1960s to 115 in 2011—it was because global trends in the fishing industry, along with the discovery of other economic and strategic resources in maritime spaces, profoundly modified the legal framework of seas and oceans. Fisheries provide a particularly propitious terrain for analyzing the relationship between environmental and legal issues, even if Finley does not always push this analysis as far as it could go.

The most striking tendency is the decline in freedom of the seas—meaning circulation as well as the exploitation of maritime resources—which, until the Second World War, had been the default regime of international law. Initiatives proliferated to proclaim various forms of sovereignty, modeled on territorial sovereignty, over maritime spaces. Truman's September 1945 declaration is well known: he advanced

---

<sup>5</sup> Hervé Couteau-Bégarie, *La puissance maritime soviétique*, Paris, Economica, 1983.

the concept of an underwater continental shelf over which the United States had rights, as well as the idea of “conservation zones” relating to fisheries.

In the 1940s and 50s, Latin American countries and Iceland also threw themselves into a series of initiatives to extend their sovereign rights beyond the narrow strip of territorial water recognized by customary law. Everything about these claims was problematic: distances, the type of rights recognized by coastal states, and the forms of their application. The controversy played out in multiple settings: the United Nations’ International Law Commission (ILC), the UN Food and Agriculture Organization, and the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), which produced two conventions, in 1958 and 1982. The conflict often pitted southern countries, which sought sovereignty over their natural resources, against developed countries seeking to extend their geographic scope in pursuit of the very same resources.<sup>6</sup>

Conflicts also developed, at every level, between fishermen backed by their respective governments. This was the age of the great proceedings before the International Court of Justice, beginning with the “Fisheries Case” (United Kingdom vs. Norway), tried in December 1951. In several places, quasi-military tensions broke out, finding their proverbial illustration in the “Cod Wars” between the United Kingdom and Iceland, waged on and off between 1958 and the 1970s. The 1982 Convention on the Law of the Sea partially reframed the legal framework of these conflicts by extending territorial waters and creating the concept of “exclusive economic zones.” Yet the increasing depletion of resources both perpetuated usage conflicts and shifted their location, as evidenced in the tensions that occurred in the 1990s off the coasts of Canada or the Gulf of Gascony.<sup>7</sup>

On this odyssey through fish-full waters, none of the passengers comes out untarnished: neither the Soviet captains hiding their suspicious fishing practices and masking their catch numbers, nor the American authorities who voluntarily ignored their own fishers to build a strategic alliance with Japan, nor the countless participants in the fishing industry’s global networks, which extend from catch to consumption. In

---

<sup>6</sup> Florence Galletti, “Le droit de la mer, régulateur des crises pour le contrôle des espaces et des ressources : quel poids pour des Etats en développement?,” *Mondes en développement* no. 154, 2011/2, pp. 121-136.

<sup>7</sup> On the latter conflict, see Yves Rodriguez and Hélène Ruiz Fabri, *Les droits des pêcheurs espagnols dans l’Europe bleue*, Bordeaux, Presses Universitaires de Bordeaux-Maison des Pays Ibériques, 1989.

this way, the book manages to construct a global perspective on an industry that is too often divided into sub-sectors, with each species being the focus of specialized studies.

The book offers a convincing account of the globalization of fishing fleets through new industrial process and government support. It also analyzes the geopolitical stakes lurking behind this trend and tries to connect them to the establishment of new legal frameworks for the seas, which has to grapple with the “elementary fluidity” of their basic component.<sup>8</sup> Exclusive economic zones, international fishing agreements, and regional or industrial organizations are elements of a system that cannot claim, whatever it might say, to have as its goal the preservation of resources. These elements should incite us to abandon the endlessly repeated “tragedy of the commons”<sup>9</sup> as an explanation of the depletion of fishing resources, so that we can look these all-too-human policies in the face.

**Reviewed:** Carmel Finley, *All the Boats on the Ocean. How Government Subsidies Led to Global Overfishing*, Chicago-London, The University of Chicago Press, 2017, 224 p.

First published in [laviedesidees.fr](http://laviedesidees.fr), 16 January 2019.  
Translated from the French by Michael Behrent.  
Published in [booksandideas.net](http://booksandideas.net), 18 March 2019.

---

<sup>8</sup> Jean-Paul Pancraccio, *Droit de la mer*, Paris, Dalloz, 2010, p. 15.

<sup>9</sup> See *Books & Ideas*, <https://booksandideas.net/Elinor-Ostrom-Fighting-the-Tragedy-of-the-Commons.html>.