

## Introduction

**I**n 1978 all the fish I cared about died. They were the biggest largemouth bass I had ever seen, and they lived in a pond ten minutes' walk from my house on a large estate in the backwoods of Greenwich, Connecticut, perhaps the most famously wealthy town in America. We did not own the house, the estate, the pond, or the largemouth bass, but I still thought of the fish as my fish. I had found them, and the pond was my rightful hunting ground.

My mother had rented the house as she would three other homes in Greenwich, because it gave the illusion of magnificent proprietorship. She tended toward small cottages on large estates—converted stables, liverymen's accommodations that were the unclaimed, declining appendages of older, fading wealth, unsold because of divorces or other family complications, rented out to us for a

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reasonable fee that would become unreasonable and impel our moving on to other cottages on other collapsing estates.

Fishing was the one constant during these years. Sensing in it a masculine, character-building quality, my mother arranged it so that the cottages we rented always had access to streams and lakes or abutted other properties we could trespass upon that had such resources. She trusted my instincts for spotting fishy water and used me as a kind of divining rod before signing a lease. And for most of my childhood, we were within a short walk of a potentially fruitful cast. Our longest residence was in the aforementioned house near the giant largemouth bass. In the first two years we lived there, I spent all my summer evenings and weekend mornings pursuing them.

In the winter of 1978, though, a fierce blizzard hit southern Connecticut. Temperatures were often below zero and at one point it snowed for thirty-three hours straight. Perhaps it was the cold that killed the fish, or the copper sulfate I helped the caretaker drag through the pond the previous summer to manage the algal blooms, or maybe even the fishermen I'd noticed trespassing on the estate one day, scoping out my grounds. But whatever caused it, after that winter never again did I spot a living fish. Of course I tried. I trolled pretty much every square foot after school the following year, often with a neighbor who had moved in after the era of the great fish. When two months of dragging lures up and down the shoreline produced not even a strike, my neighbor finally stuck a pin in my irrational bubble of hope.

"I don't care what you say about what *was*," I remember him shouting. "There is not a fucking fish in this whole goddamn lake, and I'm *never* fishing here again."

Like any hunter whose grounds have gone bad, I set out looking for new territory. I followed the outflow of the pond down a series

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of cascades that in turn flattened out into a low, swampy meadow of deep oxbows. Only minuscule shiners, crawfish, and escaped goldfish swam here. Farther and farther I went, until the stream joined a larger river and passage was blocked by a fence that a wealthy landowner had erected. Inspecting a map at the library, I found that this was a significant juncture for my stream (as with “my” pond, I had annexed the stream and referred to it now as “mine”). The point at which it was no longer my stream was where it entered the Byram River, a flow that during the times of Native American sovereignty was called the Armonck, or “fishing place,” but which, according to one local legend, the English renamed because of the native tendency to pester white men with armfuls of shad and herring for trade and the endlessly repeated entreaty “Buy rum? Buy rum?” The Byram continued south for another ten miles after the juncture before widening and finally emptying out into the sea. The beginning of an idea came to me.

Several hundred dollars made it into my account after an ersatz bar mitzvah that my partially Jewish family cobbled together for me when I turned thirteen, and through a debt-leveraged matching grant from the depths of my mother’s complicated finances I was able to purchase a used aluminum boat and a twenty-horsepower outboard engine. Using her good figure and her ability to forge solidarity with the working classes (she had been a friend of the American socialist Michael Harrington and was an experienced strike aide-de-camp), my mother persuaded the Greenwich harbormaster to let us jump the waiting list for a boat slip at the Grass Island Marina. By the summer of 1981, I had a boat, a place to store it, and several thousand square miles of sea for my own use. Better hunting grounds had been found at last.

This was not the time of child seats or swallowproof soda-can

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tabs. No safety seals secured Tylenol bottles or yogurt containers. Today it would be considered parental negligence, but in that first summer of boat ownership my mother would drive me down to the Grass Island Marina, seat belt-less, in her black secondhand luxury-edition Chrysler Cordoba and drop me off at my thirdhand boat. As I finished dumping my gear out of her trunk, she would light a Dunhill cigarette, cough heavily, and then, with a glance in her rearview, speed off into the childless afternoon ahead of her. So, at the age of thirteen, I learned how to navigate and fish on the sea by myself. It wasn't difficult—I'm sure most children, given the opportunity, could have figured it out. Once upon a time, being thirteen really did mean you were a man. But the feeling of steaming out into open water in pursuit of wild game, leaving the financial and physical constriction of mainland Connecticut behind, was exhilarating.

I did not have a GPS to plot my position or sonar to help me find fish. There was no cell phone to "check in" with home. I learned to find quarry by chasing flocks of diving terns or following a line of rocks from the shore with the assumption (usually right) that they indicated similar fish-holding rock piles down below the surface. If a rivet came loose from the hull of my boat—a sometime occurrence, since the hull had not been anodized to withstand salt water—I would slip off a flip-flop and hold the errant piece of metal in place with my big toe. I was sometimes able to persuade my older brother to join me, but midway through that first summer he announced that he "no longer wanted to kill things." I didn't mind. I was happy to be alone with the fish and the ocean.

By my second year of boat ownership, I began to understand the flow of fish as they came and left Long Island Sound. St. Patrick's Day, around when the forsythias first bloomed, was the time

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to test the mudflats for flounder just off the Indian Harbor Yacht Club docks. By April, when the forsythia shriveled to brown and the dogwoods came into flower, mackerel would have passed into the Sound and blackfish would be on the reefs surrounding Great Captain Island—a sure sign that it was time to put the boat in the water. Soon the lilacs would blossom, heralding the arrival of the first weakfish and porgies in May. And by the time lawns were being mowed with ferocity ashore, bluefish were coming into the harbors, devouring the mackerel and menhaden and everything else that had the misfortune to get in their way.

Striped bass, the prize of prizes, were also rumored to make an appearance around this time, though for me those fish remained only a rumor—they were already too rare for a poorly skilled captain to find them. By fall, blackfish would arrive again, along with a reappearance of flounder, and by wintertime, when my boat was back on blocks and nothing could be caught, I would enlist the much more substantial financial resources of my father and cajole him into taking me fishing on the *Viking Starship* party boat out of Montauk, where we would steam miles and miles offshore in search of codfish.

Before self-sufficiency became trendy and “locavorism” a catchword, I learned how to make my pastime “sustainable.” Season by season I would take my surplus catch to the parking lot of my junior high and sell my fish out of the trunk of my mother’s Cordoba for a dollar a pound. The miserably paid teachers would crowd around, and by the end of a sales session I would have enough cash on hand to buy gas for the next trip out.

The years of my boat and “my” ocean gave me a deep, atavistic belief in the resilience of nature. Even with the proximity of the Gatsbyesque mansions hugging the shorelines, the faint roar of I-95 audible as I cruised the bays, and all the other evidence of human

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civilization, Long Island Sound still felt to me like wilderness—a place to freely search out and capture wild game. I thought of the sea as a vessel of desires and mystery, a place of abundance I did not need to question. The ocean provides, therefore I fish. During my childhood I was often reminded how wealthy my neighbors and schoolmates were and how insecurely my family lived by comparison. The sea, meanwhile, was the great leveler. No fisherman, no matter how rich, had any more right than I did to a huge expanse of territory and resources.

But the desire to pursue fish and the desire to pursue females of your own species are inversely proportional. The fishing jones waxes from about age seven until sixteen or so and then abruptly withers in the harsh hormonal light of adolescence. Brief hot flashes of the fishing urge come on at times in the high teens, but they have an unanchored quality. The prime directive of life has shifted, and dusk no longer conjures the possibility of seabirds diving into a school of breaking game fish, but rather the moment when perfume and perspiration waft into the air, intermingled.

The summer I turned eighteen, my boat never left the two sawhorses it sat upon in wintertime, and it moldered, barnacle-covered, like a nautical version of Shel Silverstein's *The Giving Tree*, in the grassy parking spot adjacent to the last of my mother's rental cottages. And by the time I was nineteen and in college, I no longer came back to Long Island Sound. My mother sold my boat when I turned twenty. Fishing had done whatever good it was going to do for me as a man, she figured, and that was that.

But while erotic love between two parties tends to vanish for good when it exits, the bond between fishers and fishing has a way of circling back and restoring itself along different lines. After a decade and a half of various romantic false starts, often abroad, I

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found myself on the East Coast in my early thirties with a renewed desire to fish. Yet, like all mature loves, this next fishing phase aroused suspicion as well as pleasure.

The second fishing period of my life was also brought on by my mother. I had recently returned from working in Bosnia, a frustratingly landlocked and ruined place, where the best spots for natural idylls had been rolled over by tanks or scavenged to the bone by refugees. I often found myself staring down into the Drina River near the bullet-pocked city of Mostar, bluer than blue, but ultimately fishless from four years of war and subsistence angling.

During my time abroad, my mother and I had grown estranged and spoke rarely. This continued until she quickly ended the estrangement by receiving a diagnosis of metastatic lung cancer. I quit my job and spent the spring with her. Most of the afternoons of these three bad months were at her bedside, and, as can happen with someone fast approaching death, conversations were far-ranging, mundane, significant, and entirely out of context. Toward the middle of the second month, a clarity came over her; she could see the strain that her bad end was putting on me. One afternoon she sat up in bed and attempted to fix her wandering eyes into a focused, important stare. “Why don’t you go fishing?” she asked, then fell back in a coughing fit.

Fishing? What a thought! But then again, why not? My brother was on hand to take care of our mother for the few days I’d be gone. It was April. A good fishing time for the East Coast, as I remembered it. Forsythias were still in bloom, and dogwoods were coming on, which meant flounder, blackfish, and mackerel. But when I called around to the tackle shops I had frequented in my youth, I found that the narrative of the spring migration had changed. The flounder season had been curtailed to only a few short weeks, and people

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spoke of a two-fish outing as a banner day, whereas once we had caught bucketfuls. Blackfish were hard to come by. Mackerel had not entered the eastern half of the sound in any numbers in a decade. A little bit farther afield, codfish that I used to catch with my father on divorced-dad weekends aboard the massive *Viking Starship* were almost nonexistent. There had to be fish out there somewhere, but the terrain had changed and I didn't know how to find my bearings. And when my mother finally died in June of 2000 and we spread her ashes at Tod's Point in Greenwich, the anglers who worked the shoreline there were fewer than I remembered and their buckets were generally empty.

Loss can have a tricky way of playing itself out in the mind of the loser. A psychologist once told me that in the face of loss either you can grieve the lost thing or you can incorporate it into your very being and thus forestall the grieving. Fishing somehow came to be that lost thing I clung to. With the help of my mother's 1989 Cadillac Brougham, a car she'd scarred badly on a stone pillar when the half dozen tumors in her brain had partially blinded her, I drove up and down the Connecticut and Long Island shores, northward to Massachusetts and Maine, and south again through the Carolinas and Florida, fishing all the way. And all the way, fisherman after fisherman echoed the same complaints: smaller fish, fewer of them, shorter fishing windows, holes in the annual itineraries of arrivals and departures, fewer species to catch.

In addition to fishing, I did one other thing that had been a habit of my former fishing self—I visited fish markets and tried to divine the provenance of what was on ice. The difference was palpable. If, after taking in a screening of the movie *Jaws* in the summer of 1975, you were to walk down to the bottom of Greenwich Avenue to the Bon Ton Fish Market near Railroad Avenue (as I did on many

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occasions), you would likely have found at least a dozen varieties of finfish displayed. Many of those fish would be from local waters. All of them would be wild-caught. They would buoy you up with their size and color, the clearness of their eyes, and the fresh quality of their skin.

But in the early 2000s, as I traveled the eastern seaboard, I saw that a distinctly different kind of fish market was taking shape. Abundance was still the rule, and yes, I still saw groupings of many species that could give the impression of variety and richness. But like anyone who fishes regularly, I have some ability for decoding the look of fish flesh, and I can usually tell how long ago a fish was caught and whether the names fish are sold under are quaint localisms or intentional obfuscations of something alien from far away. What I noticed was that in the center of the seafood section, whether I was in Palm Beach, Florida; Charleston, South Carolina; or Portland, Maine, four varieties of fish consistently appeared that had little to do with the waters adjacent to the fish market in question: salmon, sea bass, cod, and tuna.

Just as seeing my stream entering the Byram River had given me the idea to pursue the wider world of the ocean, seeing this peculiarly consistent flow of four fish from the different waters of the globe into the fish markets of America drew me again beyond the familiar to find out what had happened. I spent the next few years, sometimes on my own recognizance, sometimes for the *New York Times*, traveling to places I had previously only read about in the pages of *Field & Stream* and *Salt Water Sportsman*.

The more I examined the life cycles and the human exploitation of salmon, sea bass, cod, and tuna, the more I realized that my fishing history and the fishing history of humankind followed a similar pattern. Just as I had started out inland in a freshwater pond and then

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made my way down a river to coastal salt water when my grounds had gone bad, so, too, had early human fishers first overexploited their freshwater fish and then moved down the streams to their coasts to find more game. And just as I later turned to the resources of my father to take me far offshore to catch codfish beyond sight of land, so, too, had humans marshaled the resources of industry into building offshore fishing fleets when they found their near-shore waters incapable of bearing humankind's growing burden.

The more I thought of it, the more I realized that the four fish that are coming to dominate the modern seafood market are visible footprints, marking four discrete steps humanity has taken in its attempts to master the sea. Each fish is an archive of a particular, epochal shift. Salmon, a beautiful silvery animal with succulent pink flesh, is dependent upon clean, free-flowing freshwater rivers. It is representative of the first wave of human exploitation, the species that marks the point at which humans and fish first had large-scale environmental problems and where domestication had to be launched to head off extinction. Sea bass, a name applied to many fish but which increasingly refers to a single white, meaty-fleshed animal called the European sea bass, represents the near-shore shallow waters of our coasts, the place where Europeans first learned how to fish in the sea and where we also found ourselves outstripping the resources of nature and turning to an even more sophisticated form of domestication to maintain fish supplies. Cod, a white, flaky-fleshed animal that once congregated in astronomical numbers around the slopes of the continental shelves many miles offshore, heralded the era of industrial fishing, an era where mammoth factory ships were created to match cod's seemingly irrepressible abundance and turn its easily processed flesh into a cheap commoner's staple. And finally tuna, a family of lightning-fast, sometimes thousand-pound animals with

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red, steaklike flesh that frequent the distant deepwater zones beyond the continental slope. Some tuna cross the breadth of the oceans, and nearly all tuna species range across waters that belong to multiple nations or no nation at all. Tuna are thus stateless fish, difficult to regulate and subject to the last great gold rush of wild food—a sushi binge that is now pushing us into a realm of science-fiction-level fish-farming research and challenging us to reevaluate whether fish are at their root expendable seafood or wildlife desperately in need of our compassion.

Four fish, then. Or rather four archetypes of fish flesh, which humanity is trying to master in one way or another, either through the management of a wild system, through the domestication and farming of individual species, or through the outright substitution of one species for another.

This is not the first time humanity has glanced across the disorderly range of untamed nature and selected a handful of species to exploit and propagate. Out of all of the many mammals that roamed the earth before the last ice age, our forebears selected four—cows, pigs, sheep, and goats—to be their principal meats. Out of all the many birds that darkened the primeval skies, humans chose four—chickens, turkeys, ducks, and geese—to be their poultry. But today, as we evaluate and parse fish in this next great selection and try to figure out which ones will be our principals, we find ourselves with a more complex set of decisions before us. Early man put very little thought into preserving his wild food. He was in the minority in nature, and the creatures he chose to domesticate for his table were a subset of a much greater, wilder whole. He had no idea of his destructive potential or of his abilities to remake the world.

Modern man is a different animal, one who is fully aware of his capability to skew the rules of nature in his favor. Up until the mid-

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twentieth century, humans tended to see their transformative abilities as not only positive but inevitable. Francis Galton, a leading Victorian intellectual, infamously known as the founder of eugenics but also a prolific writer on a wide range of subjects including animal domestication, wrote at the dawn of the industrialization of the world's food system, "It would appear that every wild animal has had its chance of being domesticated." Of the undomesticated animals left behind, Galton had this depressing prediction: "As civilization extends they are doomed to be gradually destroyed off the face of the earth as useless consumers of cultivated produce."

And that brings us to the present day, the crucial point at which we stand in our current relationship with the ocean. Must we eliminate all wildness from the sea and replace it with some kind of human controlled system, or can wildness be understood and managed well enough to keep humanity and the marine world in balance?

In spite of the impression given by numerous reports in the news media, wild fish still exist in great numbers. The wild harvest from the ocean is now around 90 million tons a year. The many cycles and subcycles that spin and generate food are still spinning, sometimes with great vigor, and they require absolutely no input from us in order to continue, other than restraint. In cases where grounds have been seemingly tapped out, ten years' rest has sometimes been enough to restore them to at least some of their former glory. World War II, while one of the most devastating periods in history for humans, might be called "The Great Reprieve" if history were written by fish. With mines and submarines ready to blow up any unsuspecting fishing vessel, much of the North Atlantic's depleted fishing grounds were left fallow and fish increased their numbers significantly.

But is modern man capable of *consciously* creating restraint

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without some outside force, like war? Is there some wiser incarnation of the hunter-gatherer that will compel us to truly conserve our wild food, or is humanity actually hardwired to eradicate the wild majority and then domesticate a tiny subset? Can we not resist the urge to remake a wild system, to redirect the energy flow of that system in a way that serves us?

In his landmark 1968 essay in the journal *Science*, “The Tragedy of the Commons,” the ecologist Garret Hardin noted that “natural selection favors the forces of psychological denial. The individual benefits as an individual from his ability to deny the truth even though society as a whole, of which he is a part, suffers.” What we have seen up until now, with both the exploitation of wild fish and the selection and propagation of domestic fish, is a wave of psychological denial of staggering scope. With wild fish we have chosen, time after time, to ignore the fundamental limits the laws of nature place on ecosystems and have consistently removed more fish than can be replaced by natural processes. When wild stocks become over-exploited, we have turned to domestication. But the fish we have chosen to tame are by and large animals that satisfy whimsical gustatory predilections rather than the requirements of sound ecologically based husbandry. All these developments have gone on underwater and out of sight of the average modern seafood eater. We eat more fish every year, not just collectively but on a per capita basis, pausing only (and only briefly) when evidence surfaces of the risk of industrial contaminants in our seafood supply. Under the umbrella of these collective acts of denial, individual and corporate rights, national prejudices, and environmental activism have been cobbled together into something government officials like to call “ocean policy.” In fact, there is no “ocean policy” as such, at least none that looks at wild and domesticated fish as two components of a common future.

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But now, as wild and domesticated fish reach a point where they are nearly equal parts of the marketplace, this is just the kind of ocean policy we need. And in telling the story of four fish, for which the collision of wildness and domestication is particularly relevant, I shall attempt to separate human wants from global needs and propose the terms for an equitable and long-lasting peace between man and fish.