

Video Review

Trap Fishing. 1991. 1/2" VHS videotape (US\$10.00). 30 minutes. Produced by Terra TV, with funding from the New York State Sea Grant Extension Program; video by Rameshwar Das. Available from Robert J. Kent, New York Sea Grant Extension Program, Cornell University Laboratory, 39 Sound Avenue, Riverhead NY 11901-1017 (Fax: 1-516-369-5944).

Work is Our Joy: The Story of the Columbia River Gillnetters. 1989. 1/2" VHS videotape (US\$25.00 + \$3 Shipping & Handling). 32 minutes. Oregon State University Extension Sea Grant (OSU Seafoods Laboratory, 250 36th St., Astoria, Oregon 97103) and the Columbia River Maritime Museum, Astoria, Oregon.

The Water Talks to Me. 1989. 1/2" (US\$110) or 3/4" (US\$175) VHS videotape; rentals available. 29 minutes. Produced and edited by Nancy Cohen; Diverse Productions, P.O. Box 519, Cambridge, Massachusetts, USA 02238.

The three videos I review are all situated in the United States, about one-half hour long, and suitable for classroom use. And one way or the other they all celebrate commercial fishing as a way of making a living. From that point they diverge. *Trap Fishing* is about baymen of New York who fish with stationary traps; *Work is Our Joy* features river fishermen of Oregon and Washington state who fish with gill-nets; and *The Water Talks to Me* shows offshore fishermen of Massachusetts who fish with otter trawls. The first two were produced in conjunction with state Sea Grant Extension programs (roughly comparable to agricultural extension); they are somewhat less 'professional' and much less costly than the third. And the second two are ethnographic while the first is technical. I review each in turn.

Trap Fishing is a no-nonsense account of how to make and use one fishing technique, the ocean trap or pound-net. It features two Long Island, New York, baymen, Tom Lester and Brad Lowen, uncle and nephew, who briefly celebrate their families' long tradition in fishing, back to the 1600s, before getting to the business at hand. Lowen does all of the narration in the video; Lester quietly does his share of the work.

The traps featured are very large (up to 700 feet from one end to the other) stationary structures made of poles driven into the bottom of the bay, from which are hung nets. They form a complex made up of a long leader coming out from the shore, which migrating fish strike as they move along shore; and heart shaped funnels or 'wings' that direct the fishes' efforts to escape the net seaward into the final destination, a large net 'box' where the fish are trapped and remain until removed by the fishermen. The general idea is found worldwide where fish migrate; here it developed into gigantic traps with the invention of net-making machinery in the mid-19th century. The traps or pound-nets were widely used along the eastern coast of the United States until the 1940s or 1950s but are now found only in small pockets such as eastern Long Island, eastern New Jersey, and parts of Maryland and Virginia.

At different seasons of the year, Brad Lowen – and of course Rameshwar Das, the video maker – shows the work involved in cutting, painting, and installing stakes for the traps. The video mostly features Brad talking and showing what is happening around him, with some switches to footage showing the traps in actual use. We learn the technical details, e.g. why the stakes are cut in the winter months, why the paint includes copper oxide, how the stake holes are drilled in the bottom of the bay, what 'dirty' nets

are and how to take care of them, the dangers of storms, voracious bluefish, and nets overloaded with crabs, the types of fish caught at different seasons, and so forth. We are also reminded that this is a commercial operation, 'what we do for a living.' Happily, the video was made when the bay fish were more abundant than in the previous five years, and so Brad Lowen is upbeat. He also expresses the familiar job satisfaction theme: why fish? Yes, it's a lot of work, time, but 'it's fun!...It's almost like a Christmas present every day...; you see things that you don't normally see, you do thing that few people do....and it's just something that I really enjoy.'

The video is clearly and properly educational about the technology of trap fishing. It does not pretend to do anything more, and as such preserves some of the cultural dignity of working fishermen. The device of a sustained interview with a fisherman works very well to provide a sense of authority and authenticity. Who else knows so much about technology? The device also gives the sense of an extended field trip with a class. In teaching, the video could be usefully combined with Peter Matthiesson's book *Men's Lives: The Surfmen and Baymen of the South Fork* (1986, New York, Random House), about the fishermen of eastern Long Island.

The Columbia is one of the great rivers of the American Pacific Northwest region; it comes out to the sea between the states of Oregon and Washington, and every year it attracts salmon that move upriver to spawn (or try to, against the challenge of dams and diversions). Indians depended on and mastered the technique of fishing for Columbia River salmon. In the 1850s white men from New England brought their gill-netting technique to the task. *Work is Our Joy* focuses on what followed, the rise of the commercial salmon fishery on the river. This is an engrossing record of immigrant experience, of Finns, Swedes, Norwegians, Yugoslavs and others who brought knowledge and commitment to the sea. It is a study of technology and culture: the boats and gear of gill-netting on the Columbia River and the meaning of the work to the men and women involved in it.

The video, which is superbly written by Irene Martin, is based on oral history interviews with 16 men and women who were involved in this fishery in the past. The title comes from one of these men, who recalled a family saying: 'Beginning is always difficult; work is our joy; and industry always overcomes bad luck.' At the end the theme of joy appears again, in a discussion of gill-netting as being 'in the blood' and dependent more on the experience and love for the work that comes from being 'born into it' than on teaching: 'I think it's probably a matter of receiving joy in what you're doing. There are some people who just fish, and others who *love* to fish.'

The theme is communicated by the voices and messages of those interviewed and through old and recent photography of these people, the river, boats, people mending and making nets, great catches of salmon, the headlines of old newspapers, and more. The joy and love of fishing are underscored by a musical sound track that is exceptionally well-designed for an educational documentary; it includes original guitar, electronic, violin and banjo-mandolin music. The electronic music manages to evoke the squeaking sounds of boats moored at the dock. A banjo-mandolin sequence of 'Santa Lucia' backs up one of the old-timer's memories of a night during the August fishing season, at the mouth of the Columbia River, when someone on 'the Mediterranean side' (the boats gathered and worked along ethnic lines) began playing this tune on a violin, and suddenly everyone else on the river was quiet.

Particularly intriguing is discussion of the development of 'snag unions,' or groups of fishermen who pooled resources to hire divers to remove snags such as logs (or other debris, including one 16-ton steam engine) from the drifts, or grounds used by gill-netters using 'diver' rather than 'float' nets (the difference and technology are clearly explained). Through the work and investment in clearing drifts of snags, union members claimed heritable and saleable fishing rights, 'drift rights.' These became legitimate rights, and the basis for controlling access and reducing costly conflict. Another local-level communal effort at regulating the fishery shown in this video is the development of a system of drawing lots for

rights to fish the drift, rather than having to quickly run back up to the end of the line to wait one's turn, and spend hours just waiting. Yet another, one of the informal but very effective ways the rules were enforced, is also shown: the practice of 'corking,' or laying out nets to cut off fish from the nets of offenders (or other enemies).

The critical role of women in the fishery is presented unobtrusively but well, including an interview with Georgia Maki, who makes her living knotting and mending nets for other fishermen, shots of women working with men, and discussion of the movement of the entire family to the mouth of the river for the August salmon run and the importance of support of women and children to the fishermen. The video also dwells on the critical late-19th century phase of organizing fishermen, on the one hand, and canneries or packers on the other, including the formation of a fishermen's union to both help clear snags from estuaries and negotiate for prices, a violent strike, an attempt to form a cooperative cannery, and the formation of a combine of packers.

The video is one of the best I have seen on the history and ethnology of a fishery. I would have liked more information, such as on the fate of the cooperative and the aftermath of the formation of the Columbia River Packers' Association, which is only suggested in interviews with people who fished for this combine. There is also only a hint of the contemporary situation on the Columbia River: near the end, a radio station is heard announcing brief seasonal openings and other restrictions, but hardly enough for the viewer to understand that hardly any commercial gill-net fishing now takes place on the Columbia River because of bitterly fought contests between Indians, sports anglers, different kinds of commercial fishermen, and behind this all, the public utilities that run dams and divert irrigation water. Using this video for teaching would require filling in this kind of information, but I am sure that the video-makers – Irene Martin, the writer, Lawrence Johnson, the producer and photographer, and advisors such as the anthropologists Courtland Smith, Kent Martin (also, and first and foremost, a gill-netter), and Bent Thygesen – would be happy to suggest appropriate readings.

Finally, when I first showed this video-tape neither members of my graduate class nor myself noticed until near the end the fact that the filming is entirely based on still-shots: old and new photographs. The video is so skillfully produced that when a snapshot of an old man or woman appears with that person's voice, one imagines and almost sees that person move; at the end of the tape, one remembers what a drift-netting operation looked like even though all that was seen were still shots from different points in time. *Work is Our Joy* is not only an educational accomplishment but also an artistic one.

Nancy Cohen's documentary *The Water Talks to Me*, which was first broadcast on public television in the Boston area in 1989, is set in the fishing town of Gloucester, Massachusetts. It focuses on the lives of a father and son, Normie and David Borge, and David's wife Melissa and their children, at a critical period in the latter 1980s that is intended to reflect larger trends and problems. Normie, who was born and bred a Gloucester fisherman and worked most of his life on the boats, was convinced by his son David to buy an offshore trawler with him in 1984. Unfortunately, their venture coincided with a downturn in the New England groundfish (e.g. cod, haddock, flounder) fishery, and they are interviewed and followed to the fishing grounds just before they decide to sell their boat and then during its sale. At the end of the film, in 1988, the boat is sold, and we follow the men as they leave the boat for the last time. In the interim, we learn more about the fishery, its technology, and challenges to both families and resource managers through skillful footage and interviews with other fishermen and women and fishery professionals.

Both Normie and David are eloquent and revealing about their feelings and the challenges of fishing. Normie develops the familiar occupational theme of fishing as 'in my blood' but with the ambivalence that gives this film its dramatic tension: 'It's in my blood; I just can't get away from fishing. I love the ocean. The water's hitting [the dock, audibly on the film] now; it makes a noise to me, ... the water's

talking to me. You guys probably don't understand what I'm saying. I never want to move from Gloucester, I love Gloucester. But I'm just tired of fishing. The business has gone down so bad, it's just, it's hard.' Salvatore Favaloro, a retired fisherman who now sells nets and gear and provided a home movie of his boat and the work on board, restates the strong ambivalence about fishing for a living when he remembers never seeing his children, out to sea six months at a time, but then – with no evident transition – reflects that he hates working on shore 'with no windows, the ceiling falling down.' Salvatore offers a simple but unconvincing resolution: 'Every job has its drawback.'

The video vividly shows the situation affecting the Borges, and, by implication, others in Gloucester, through shots of a few buckets of mixed species in the bottom of the large hold of a dragger; a scene in which a young man comes in to bring his mother a sad looking codfish, saying fishing was poor, but there's enough to *cook* anyway; and several interviews comparing the catches of the past (abundant) to those of the present (meager).

According to the narrator and several people interviewed, the reason for the tragic situation of the Borges and others in Gloucester is very simple: overfishing. The fishermen reflect on the impact of modern depth-sounding, fish-finding, and navigational gear on fishing success and hence the fact that 'the poor fish hasn't got a chance.' Footage from a trip to the fishing grounds with the Borges shows the cod end of an otter trawl almost completely full – of dogfish, which in New England has been considered nearly worthless 'trash.' Not only is there less caught overall, but the composition of the catches has changed dramatically.

The film's thesis of overfishing is given authority by interviews with a government biologist (Richard Langton) and a government fishery manager (Guy Marchessault). Marchessault (then deputy director of the New England regional fishery management council) repeats the reigning dogma that has, nonetheless, not convinced the fishermen of New England: 'there has to be less caught for there to be significant stock rebuilding.' No one would deny the reality of over-fishing but there have also been environmental changes; moreover, the solution – catch less so there is more in the future – is not as sure a thing as many fishery managers would have it, given the poorly understood ecological events and processes of the sea. Given the predominance of dogfish (a small shark) and skates in New England waters, do codfish have a chance to rebound?

If the writing and narration of this compelling film can be faulted, it is for taking what Langton and Marchessault say too earnestly and also for not giving enough weight to what else is going on that makes life difficult for Gloucester's fisher families. Fortunately, the interviews and images give clues to other aspects of this situation so that the film is, overall, balanced. Most compelling and more revealing is the testimony of David's wife Melissa. She notes that when they started fishing in 1984, she went along with it on the understanding that fishing 3 days a week would be enough to meet the bills and support the family; however, with increased scarcity of the higher priced fish, they are now out for four or five days continuously. That is simply too much. Unlike the other woman featured in the film, Lena Novello (a founding member of the Gloucester Fishermen's Wives Association), Melissa did not come from a fishing family nor did she expect the man she married to fish; that came later. She finds it particularly hard to deal with the loneliness, uncertainty, and responsibility that seem to go with waiting for her husband to return from sea, and here and there, although subtly – until the very end, when it is said straight out – it appears that this is a major reason for selling the boat.

When depicting changes in the politics of international fisheries, including the 200 mile limit, the film notes the 1984 World Court ruling on the dispute between the U.S. and Canada over the fishing ground known as Georges Bank. It records the complaint of one of the New England fishermen that this is a disaster because the Canadians, who received less of the bank but more of the more productive area, are allegedly doing less than the Americans to protect the resource. Ironically, the Canadian government has

a far more restrictive management regime than the U.S. has on Georges Bank or anywhere else, so one could argue that they are doing more (if to not much greater effect, but this would return us to the issue of the reigning dogma). This is not mentioned, and an unfortunate effect is to make the film seem very political to anyone with experience outside of New England.

The Water Talks to Me also notes that the low price of fish and competition from Canadian fish in the market are problems perhaps as serious as that of fish scarcity. However, this information is heard very briefly. And neither the narrator nor those interviewed discuss the related issue of fish quality. However, the video brings up this issue visually, through footage of the Gloucester fishermen handling their fish. These scenes are extensive and eloquent in suggesting that a poor competitive position vis-a-vis Canada may not be due entirely to unfair trade practices. For example, watch the dockworkers sling cod around with sharp prongs (that bruise and invite infection to the flesh of the fish); it has been almost 20 years since prongs were allowed on the docks of eastern Canada. Also note the generally cavalier way that fish of all kinds are handled and the unkempt and unhygienic look of the vessels and docks, again in contrast with what can be seen today in Canada or Scandinavia, major competitors.

The video offers scenes that can be the springboard for further discussion in a sociology or anthropology class. Near the beginning of the film is a set of scenes from the annual Blessing of the Fleet in Gloucester, showing dignitaries from church and state as well as school children celebrating the fishery in a decades-old tradition worthy of analysis in itself (in the 'making of tradition' vein: why so much parading now, when the fishery is in so much trouble?). The narrator opines that the people in the film feel 'tied to the water...with a hope and faith that can only be explained by tradition,' a theme that is reinforced by several statements from Normie Borge about fishing 'in the blood' but that might call for further debate. There are two stories about danger and the miracle of survival at sea, one from Normie Borge and the other from Lena Novello. Normie Borge interprets his miraculous escapes from drowning as meaning 'the ocean don't want me,' a sign that he should continue fishing (as he makes plans to leave). Lena recalls the escape from near-drowning of her father and a large number of other close relatives back in the days when a boat coming in at half mast was a fearfully awaited and common sight; she recounts their story of seeing a vision of St. Rosalia, followed by a rescue boat. In addition, there are a few precious moments of Lena Novello at a public hearing on oil and gas exploration on Georges Bank, where she lets loose the wonderful rhetoric that has made a big difference in the politics of coastal conservation: '...When God created the world He gave us Georges Bank...' Finally, the interviews with Melissa Borge and Lena Novello are grist for the ethnological mill on families, culture, and occupational choice.

The Water Talks to Me is an excellent way to show a class what otter trawl fishing technology is like and to introduce students to questions concerning the sociology and anthropology of occupation, gender, and resource management. It is a very professional and beautiful production.

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- 1991 *Entre el mar y la tierra. Los pescadores artesanales canarios.* s.l.: Dirección General de Cooperación Cultural Ministerio de Cultura, Editorial Interinsular Canaria.

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- 1991 *Andamanen und Nikobaren. Ein Kulturbild der Inseln im Indischen Meer.* Dresden/Munster: Lit Verlag.

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- 1992 *Japanese Whaling. End of an Era?* Scandinavian Institute of Asian Studies, Monograph Series No. 61. London: Curzon Press Ltd.

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