

BOOK REVIEW

JOHNSON, T. (2005) *Entanglements. The Intertwined Fates of Whales and Fishermen*. Gainesville, FL: University of Florida Press. xvi + 289 pp., ill., index. \$ 29.95 (hard cover).

In a subtle blend of reportage, oral history, background information and eyewitness reports, Tora Johnson tells the compelling story of the intertwined plight of right whales and fishermen in east coast USA and Canada. With about 300 specimens in the North Atlantic, the right whales' population is critically endangered. Despite protective measures, every year a considerable number of right whales (and other cetaceans such as humpbacks) get killed due to collisions with ships and entanglement in fishing gear, together accounting for two-thirds of the annual mortality. Johnson, a Maine based human ecologist and freelance writer, has conducted scores of interviews with people involved in one way or another in this tragedy: scientists, whale protectors, conservationists, fishermen, news reporters, policymakers and bureaucrats. Based on these interviews, a survey and observations during meetings, she explores their opposing views and the dilemmas and contradictions that surface in attempts to solve the problem. Johnson also witnessed and participated in heroic efforts to disentangle whales, mostly taken on the initiative of ill-financed but resourceful marine scientists who are convinced that something needs to be done. They are equally convinced that disentangling whales is a last resort and that preventing entanglement is the ultimate solution.

In twelve well-written chapters, the story unfolds with the protagonists being right whales with names like Ibis and Churchill, whale rescuers such as Stormy Mayo, Jon Lien and Wayne Ledwell, and a host of other characters. The contentious climate that surrounds the issue comes out prominently, but Johnson avoids taking sides. Rather, she painstakingly tries to understand the various viewpoints, including those of fishermen who usually serve as scapegoats. The author explains that a number of circumstances and developments have caused the decline of the right whale population and the growing number of entanglements. A proliferation of fixed fishing gear (cod and lobster traps, gill nets) since the 1980s increased the chance of whales getting trapped or tangled in nets and lines. Made of stronger and more durable synthetic material, whales could not easily free themselves once entangled. More than two-thirds of all North Atlantic right whales bear scars from encounters with fishing gear. But there were other causes for the perilous condition of the right whale population, too. The reproductive success rate of right whales was extremely low in the late 1990s, which had to do with a precipitous drop in the whales' food, a tiny copepod (*Calanus finmarchicus*). In turn, this was caused by oscillations in climate, currents and temperature. With few calves to make up for mortality, each dead right whale spells disaster for the species.

The fishermen are also in dire straits. The US and Canadian fishing industry already suffered a serious blow after the 1992 groundfish crisis that led to a ban on catching northern cod. Many fishermen who had switched to lobstering now face new problems. Apart from a loss of fishing gear and fish revenue if a whale collides with their nets or lines, the public outcry to protect whales following news about such events could lead to ever more restrictions or even closures. Under the Endangered

Species Act (1973) and the Marine Mammal Protection Act (1972), a federal judge could order withdrawing fishing permits if fisheries continue to kill whales. In fact, the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) has faced many lawsuits from environmentalists in recent times, sometimes forcing the regulators to come down harshly on the fishing industry. Often, it is virtually impossible to enforce new measures (that just as often prove irrational). The fishermen know whom to blame. Johnson succinctly summarises: 'The fishermen lobby and harangue while the environmentalists sue and nitpick; and in their worst clashes, each casts the other as the villain' (p.78). She appreciates the deeply held convictions that fishermen and animal rights activists would seem to share, even though they are committed to such different causes. Married to a fisherman and herself a former fisherman (she obstinately uses the male form), Johnson opts for the survival of both whales and rural fishing communities even though she is quite critical of 'old style' and large-scale fishermen.

Johnson's sympathy is clearly not with the NMFS 'feds', although she makes an effort to empathise with the bureaucrats who face complex tasks and procedures. She shows crystal clear how management measures often have perverse effects. For example, following lawsuits launched by environmentalists that accused NMFS of stalling to really protect the right whales, it was forced by a federal judge to introduce measures on short notice. NMFS first installed Take Reduction Teams composed of multiple stakeholders who would discuss which kind of measures would lead to quick and long-term results. The idea was that some sort of consensus would arise out of their discussions, which was clearly not the case. NMFS then introduced measures that did not have broad support and simply could not be complied with by fishermen. The most bizarre – and saddening – example is what is dubbed Dynamic Area Management (DAM), a temporary measure to ban certain types of fishing gear in an area where at least three right whales are sighted at a given time. Scientists believe that the whales stay in an area for about two weeks on average. However, it would last two weeks for NMFS to chart the polygon and announce DAM measures, while it would take fishermen many days to remove all their gear from the area. In addition, they would reset the gear just outside the polygon's perimeter, creating walls of nets and lines that only increase the chance that whales get entangled. Fishermen were quick to nickname the measure 'damn DAMS', and were puzzled as to how they could possibly comply with these and other overlapping management measures that kept changing all the time.

Realising that the extant management regime was faltering seriously, in 2003 conservationists and fishermen agreed that something need to be done lest both the right whales and the fishing industry remain in jeopardy. Despite a deep mutual mistrust that had built up over the years, they proposed a common sense solution, consisting of gear regulations (using weak-links, reducing the number of vertical lines, abandoning floating ground lines) that could be introduced within a short time frame and would likely lead to results at relatively low costs. At the same time, the ineffective and widely unpopular DAM measures should be abandoned. But the NMFS regulators pointed out that it would take a long time before such new measures could be implemented and old ones withdrawn. The bureaucratic process that was supposed to produce a solution is now apparently part of the problem. With litigation being rife, there is little room for the NMFS to manoeuvre swiftly. The whales and the fishing industry therefore continue to be in peril, much to the frustration

of fishermen, environmentalists, and scientists who have worked hard to find a way out of the stalemate that paralyses the process of taking effective measures. What is happening presently puts fishermen out of business without improving the survival chances of right whales.

Tora Johnson succeeds in clearly bringing across the multidimensional and complex aspects of the whale of a problem that plagues east coast USA and Canada. Although occasionally witty, her account is serious enough. It deserves the wide readership it aims at. Johnson is unequivocal in her view of right whales and hump-back whales; they are wild animals worthy of human protection. She shuns the general public's often mythical, sentimental and romantic notion of these leviathans as intelligent, anthropomorphic gentle giants. Her reasons to advocate the whales' protection are different; she is convinced of the entangled fates of whales and fishing communities. Johnson is well aware that there are no easy solutions for the whales' perilous condition, but she is not content with what the regulators have come up with so far. Albeit tongue-in-cheek, her critique is that they should take seriously the common sense solutions that the stakeholders agree on. Her advice should be heeded. There is no time to lose, least of all for the right whale.

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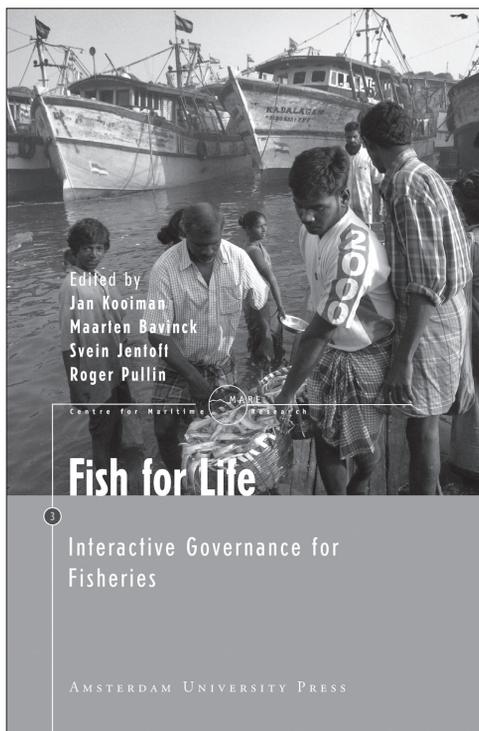
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