

# Marine Fisheries History

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The 50th Anniversary Issue  
of the *Marine Fisheries Review*

## Introduction

The 1980's seems to have been the decade for conservation anniversaries. Celebrating centennials have been the U.S. *Fishery Bulletin* (1981), NMFS Woods Hole Laboratory (1985), *Journal of the Marine Biological Association* (1987) and the Association itself (1984), Pacific halibut fishery (1988), Marine Biological Laboratory at Woods Hole, Mass. (1988), and England's Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries, and Food (1989).

While the U.S. Department of Commerce turned 75 (1988), 50th anni-

versaries were marked by the NMFS Northwest and Alaska Fisheries Center (1981), The Wildlife Society and its *Journal of Wildlife Management* (1987), National Wildlife Federation (1986), International Game Fish Association (1989), and, of course, the *Marine Fisheries Review* (1988), which provided the *raison d'être* for this special issue being devoted to "Marine Fisheries History."

In compiling and editing this issue, one point seems clear: Fisheries history, and particularly marine fisheries history, has been ignored, when compared with the history of bird and mammal exploitation, protection, research, and

management. Popular literature on "conservation history" contains comparatively little on fish or fishing. Thus, most of the chapters in the "History of American Fisheries" remain to be written.

Fortunately, a lot of material is available on various fisheries. However, it is often secreted in old or obscure Federal and state reports, newspaper files, chapters of books, and symposia proceedings which are not always readily accessible. For example, George Brown Goode's review of the U.S. Fish Commission's first decade (p. 130) was in an early U.S. Fish Commission report. And Dean

Allard's excellent discussion of Fish Commission founder Spencer Fullerton Baird (p. 124) was originally presented at an annual meeting of marine science librarians.

The more one reads by and about Spencer F. Baird, the more impressive the man becomes. Among his many legacies is the establishment of the Fish Commission's Woods Hole Laboratory (WHL) in 1885, forerunner to the NMFS Northeast Fisheries Center. Contributions from the WHL Centennial celebration begin on page 1, and they make a fine addition to the specific WHL history by Paul Galtsoff (1962) and Allard's article.

The Fish Commission's second marine laboratory at Beaufort, N.C., is reviewed by Charles and Ann Manooch (p. 72), while other Atlantic and Gulf fisheries research accomplishments are discussed by Linda Despres-Patanjo et al. (p. 69) and W. J. Richards (p. 77). Papers by Clinton E. Atkinson (p. 95, 97, 111), originally prepared for the 50th anniversary of the NMFS Northwest and Alaska Fisheries Center, Seattle, Wash. (Mitsuoka et al., 1982), review early fisheries work in U.S. west coast waters.

Then there is the question "Why bother with fisheries history?" There are several answers. Fisheries have provided essential food, employment, recreation, and industrial products to citizens ranging from Native Americans to the most recent immigrants. There have also been problems or conflicts over resource abundance, harvest, management, and utilization, as well as pollution, disease, habitat losses or degradation, etc.

When Baird took the reins of the new U.S. Commission of Fish and Fisheries in 1871 (in addition to his job as Assistant Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution and at no increase in salary), one of his first tasks was to investigate and arrest an apparent decline in New England fisheries. In reading the early Fish Commission reports, one is struck by the similarity between the fishery problems of that era and those voiced today—sometimes almost word for word.

To borrow a phrase from one of John Dasso's articles (p. 150), there appear

to be "enduring themes" not only in research, but in fisheries harvest and management issues. And some of the early concerns are as pertinent today as then—including pollution (though some of the pollutants have changed), effects of climate, salinity, and water temperatures on fishes, habitat protection or restoration, and, of course, how to manage fisheries wisely. Indeed, in many cases, it appears that very little is really new, either in the way of fisheries problems or solutions, though the magnitude or terminology may be somewhat different.

Thus, it can be useful to study the fisheries problems of just 50 or 100 years ago: What were the problems faced then and how were they addressed? Why were certain actions taken or certain avenues of research pursued or dropped? What amalgam of beliefs, pressures, etc., motivated changes in policies, research priorities, and management measures? Finally, what were the results of the decisions and actions?

The answers may appear lost or blurred at first, but if we take the time to ferret them out, the proverbial "20-20" hindsight might help us make better decisions tomorrow. If we lose that historical perspective on fisheries and management, then we lose a key element of our defense against duplicating errors of the past.

In part, fisheries history is also a story about personalities, competition (between agencies, bureaus, and departments; between fisheries and wildlife interests; and between commercial and sport fishermen), and the attendant political pressures and/or solutions. Some aspects of this are suggested in the historical overview and recollections of Seton Thompson (p. 135) as well as recent books on the University of Washington's School of Fisheries (Stickney, 1989) and the University of Wisconsin's Limnology Department (Beckel, 1987).

Spencer F. Baird saw over a century ago that "...the biological study of North American waters was a neglected field offering superb opportunities for... both abstract and practical aspects..." of fisheries research. Were he here today, Baird would probably agree that,

while not neglected, many "superb opportunities" remain for fishery research, along with several questions: What worked? What didn't? Why? And, what really mattered?

Such questions are part of the value and interest in John Dasso's three-part series on fisheries utilization research (p. 138, 150, 163), told as only an introspective and active participant can. And for those who think that the healthful aspects of eating fish and fish oils is a recent idea, reading some of the earliest literature and the review by Maurice Stansby (p. 174) is revealing.

Journalist James Reston once called history a "parade of forgotten memories." Actually, the making of history is an active process, and if those who are involved do not record their thoughts, beliefs, reasoning, and results, they stand a good chance of being misinterpreted or misunderstood much later by those bent on making the same mistakes.

Willard Bascom, in his 1988 autobiography "The Crest of the Wave," mentions a peculiar "problem" with a 70ish British coworker named Sir Charles Wright: "The problem our study group had with Sir Charles was that, no matter what ideas we thought of, he had already tried them, and they didn't work. He could remember in great detail how the similar earlier experiments had been done and why the outcome was unsatisfactory. No one doubted that he was right, but the others needed to try their own ideas and make their own mistakes. Sir Charles, always cheerful, understood and often contributed suggestions that helped reduce our chances of failure. Best of all, he never said 'I told you so' when our results turned out to be as poor as he had foretold."

We don't often have "Sir Charleses" around to help remind us of past fishery research or management trials. Today, though, we do have over a century of literature that records how fishery pioneers viewed their problems, studied them, and attempted to prevent, manage, or cope with them. Therein lies the value of studying the history of America's marine fisheries.