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## Eating the Ocean by Elspeth Probyn

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## BOOK REVIEW

*Eating the Ocean* by Elspeth Probyn (Duke University Press Books, 200 pages; 2016)

Elspeth Probyn's nonfiction book, *Eating the Ocean*, takes an interesting and holistic approach to exploring the issue of sustainable seafood. The author is not an authority on seafood or biology. In fact, she is a professor of gender and cultural studies at the University of Sydney. However, this unusual perspective lends itself to a unique exploration of the issues discussed. Through her storytelling, Probyn manages to take complex food dynamics concepts and break them into palatable, bite-sized pieces, ready for anyone to understand. However, her analysis is somewhat narrow in scope, in that she focuses more on the culture surrounding fishing, rather than the actual broad harms to fisheries, and the potential effects on other species.

Probyn's essential thesis is that fish, along with other types of seafood, must be cultivated and utilized sustainably to meet the challenge of feeding an ever-growing human population. She starts by addressing the ubiquity of fish-products, like the use of fishmeal for fertilizer in agriculture, in addition to the more obvious human consumption of fish. By opening her book with the fact that fish are essentially inescapable in a modern diet, she hooks even a less interested reader, because the issues she examines impact everyone.

Probyn uses her expertise in gender studies to keep any reader interested. This is not merely a book of interesting facts and figures about the incredibly complex fishing industry. The author uses personal experiences and stories to relate the importance of all types of fish. For instance, she spends a chapter examining women in the fishing industry to highlight their less-seen roles in this important industry. By effortlessly weaving her real-life experiences, interviews with the men and women who work in the industry, and the larger picture of sustainability efforts, Probyn makes very difficult concepts easy to understand. Additionally, she relates these ideas in a way that will intrigue readers from the coast to the desert by showing them that all people are tied to the ocean.

In the latter half of the book, Probyn focuses on an attempt to convince her readers to branch out and try fish which they may not otherwise try. As she points out, it is more sustainable to eat smaller species of fish, because they reproduce earlier in their life cycle and in greater numbers. In this part of the book, questions arise about how much she considers the non-human species (i.e., whales, dolphins, seals, sharks, etc.) on the food chain. These smaller, more sustainable fish species that may be preferable for human consumption have been identified by EarthJustice as species which need additional protection.<sup>1</sup> This may indicate that her considerations of which fish species to eat are shortsighted. EarthJustice also considers the importance of "small feeder fish" for other species,<sup>2</sup> such as whales and sea lions, whereas Probyn seems to only be concerned with feeding the human species. Even with her concern for humans, Probyn did not look at Monterey Bay

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1. EARTHJUSTICE: OCEANS PROGRAM <https://earthjustice.org/about/offices/oceans> (last visited Apr. 24, 2018).

2. *Id.*

Aquarium's highly regarded Seafood Watch Program,<sup>3</sup> which lists many of the species Probyn encourages individuals to eat as merely a good alternative, one which should be avoided in lieu of other species which are fished in a more sustainable manner. Not to mention the author's failure to discuss seafood fraud, where the purchaser of the seafood does not get the promised fish species. Probyn specifically mentions anchovies as a species which humans should consume more, but they are listed as one of the commonly mislabeled fish in Oceana's commonly mislabeled seafood campaign.<sup>4</sup>

The chapter on tuna farming is especially interesting. One of the primary topics involves the innovative ways that humans have adapted to growing a struggling species to a size where it can be eaten. Rather than utilizing harmful fishing strategies to catch large adult fish, fishermen are now catching tuna at smaller sizes and then growing them in sea pens. This allows for the larger, mature tuna to remain in the population to spawn. This chapter also explores the large-scale fishing industry which is fraught with corruption and monopolies, where a few fishermen have cornered the market on tuna and retain most of the biomass and resulting profits.

One light criticism is the amount of time the author spends on the various aesthetics of the fishing culture. A full chapter is interwoven with the feelings derived from eating an oyster, which took away from the point the author was trying to make. In that chapter, the author was discussing the ways that oyster fisheries in Scotland have changed, but the point was often lost in her concentration on the literal experience of eating oysters. The changing culture surrounding fisheries is incredibly important, and that message would have come through better without this distraction. No doubt this was in an attempt to reach the audience who is less interested in the specifics of sustainable fisheries—but if a reader had already made it to that chapter, they were already interested.

Ultimately, this was a very good book to inform the general public about the various issues concerning fisheries sustainability. It can also be a good book for someone who knows about fisheries sustainability, but may be less familiar with the human elements, like the impacts on the fishermen themselves. However, by focusing so much on the culture of fishing, Probyn has lost some of the very important facets of the topic, like the fact that humans are not the only species that need fish to survive. Probyn seems to lose this in her concern for the human population. Overall, this is an interesting read, but Probyn's limited focus only fully examines the importance of fish to humans, and not to other species.

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3. SEAFOOD WATCH PROGRAM: MONTEREY BAY AQUARIUM <http://www.seafoodwatch.org/seafood-recommendations> (last visited Apr. 24, 2018).

4. EXAMPLES OF COMMONLY MISLABELED SEAFOOD: OCEANA <http://oceana.org/examples-commonly-mislabeled-seafood-0> (last visited Apr. 24, 2018).