

Marine resources

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Water covers seven-tenths of the planet but only recently have historians begun to study human interaction with the marine environment. We ask questions such as when and how did we choose to engage with the seas, what and how much did we extract? Did we impact ocean life, and in that process how were we impacted ourselves? What used to be in the sea before humans began impacting marine ecosystems and habitats? What are the major long-term effects of human extractions of marine life? Are the impacts of recent or ancient origin? Examples will be drawn from the global History of Marine Animal Populations project. I shall argue that marine environmental history has come up with some answers to the questions and that this is a promising field for international and interdisciplinary collaboration.

The development of marine environmental history in the last 10 years has been phenomenal. We now know the basic outline of the origins of commercial fisheries in Northern Europe. We have a good sense of developments in many regions around the globe during the last 500 years ranging from the Caribbean to the White Sea, from the American Pacific to New Zealand. We are beginning to understand more about the drivers of marine resource exploitation and the political and cultural implications of national and international marine strategies.

Contemporary concerns about ocean resource extraction put new challenges to marine historians. The ocean was traditionally seen as a limitless resource. Since around 1980, marine-capture fisheries have stagnated at around 90million tonnes per year, despite massive technological investments and the opening up of distant and deep waters in the Southern hemisphere. The oceans will simply not yield more. However, the demands of the global fish market are accelerating the impact of human extractions from the oceans. Similarly, oil and gas exploration is continuing in ever deeper seas, even in the Arctic with ever increasing risks being countered by technological advances and political expedience. Marine environmental historians are therefore challenged not only to understand the interaction of humans and the sea but also to put their knowledge at the service of society. Marine conservation agencies from Australia to South Africa and all around the North Atlantic have formally recognised the importance to future ocean management of information on historical baselines of past ecosystems and human impact. The ultimate question upon us may therefore be how we as environmental historians engage with the needs of society?