



The Last Fish Tale: The Fate of the Atlantic & Survival in Gloucester, America's Oldest Fishing Port & Most Original Town

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The bestselling author of **Cod**, **Salt**, and **The Big Oyster** has enthralled readers with his incisive blend of culinary, cultural, and social history. Now, in his most colorful, personal, and important book to date, Mark Kurlansky turns his attention to a disappearing way of life: fishing—how it has thrived in and defined one particular town for centuries, and what its imperiled future means for the rest of the world.

The culture of fishing is vanishing, and consequently, coastal societies are changing in unprecedented ways. The once thriving fishing communities of Rockport, Nantucket, Newport, Mystic, and many other coastal towns from Newfoundland to Florida and along the West Coast have been forced to abandon their roots and become tourist destinations instead. Gloucester, Massachusetts, however, is a rare survivor. The livelihood of America's oldest fishing port has always been rooted in the life and culture of commercial fishing.

The Gloucester story began in 1004 with the arrival of the Vikings. Six hundred years later, Captain John Smith championed the bountiful waters off the coast of Gloucester, convincing new settlers to come to the area and start a new way of life. Gloucester became the most productive fishery in New England, its people prospering from the seemingly endless supply of cod and halibut. With the introduction of a faster fishing boat—the schooner—the industry flourished. In the twentieth century, the arrival of Portuguese, Jews, and Sicilians turned the bustling center into a melting pot. Artists and writers such as Edward Hopper, Winslow Homer, and T. S. Eliot came to the fishing town and found inspiration.

But the vital life of Gloucester was being threatened. Ominous signs were seen with the development of engine-powered net-dragging vessels in the first decade of the twentieth century. As early as 1911, Gloucester fishermen warned of the dire consequences of this new technology. Since then, these vessels have become even larger and more efficient, and today the resulting overfishing, along with climate change and pollution, portends the extinction of the very species that fishermen depend on to survive, and of a way of life special not only to Gloucester but to coastal cities all over the world. And yet, according to Kurlansky, it doesn't have to be this way. Scientists, government regulators, and fishermen are trying to work out complex formulas to keep fishing alive.

Engagingly written and filled with rich history, delicious anecdotes, colorful characters, and local recipes, **The Last Fish Tale** is Kurlansky's most urgent story, a heartfelt tribute to what he calls "socio-diversity" and a lament that "each culture, each way of life that vanishes, diminishes the richness of civilization."

From the Hardcover edition.

The Last Fish Tale: The Fate of the Atlantic & Survival in Gloucester, America's

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From Reader Review **The Last Fish Tale: The Fate of the Atlantic & Survival in Gloucester, America's Oldest Fishing Port & Most Original Town** for online ebook

Joseph Gendron says

A thoroughly enjoyable to read fish tale. I learned about the fascinating landscape and history of Gloucester and the adjacent sea and the rise and fall and sometimes recovery of its many fish species. Mr. Kurlansky also takes the reader to other ports on each side of the Atlantic to make comparisons and to point out the attraction of fishing communities to artists and tourists. He also details the changes in fishing techniques over time and their effect on the health of the fishery. The dangers inherent in deep sea fishing, particularly in earlier times, is well documented.

Jimmy says

The poet Charles Olson referred to Gloucester as "this gloire of Gloucester." What a beautiful phrase.

Many artists hang around this beautiful New England town. A poem from 1920 showed how the fishermen felt when asked what "sickens with disgust the Gloucester sailor man?" Here's the answer:

*It's these everlastin' artists, a setin' all around
A'paintin' everything we do from the top mast to the ground.*

The local attitude was summed up in the conclusion:

*For they put us into picters and they think its just immense
They call it "picteresque," I b'lieve but it certain isn't sense.*

T. S. Eliot's family had home on Eastern Point and starting from 1895, when Eliot was six, he spent every summer there with his family until 1910 when he completed his education at Harvard.

In "The Wasteland," Eliot's 1922 poem, there is a section called "Death by Water." Originally it was much longer than ten lines. This part and more about Gloucester was cut out by Ezra Pound:

*Then came the fish at last. The eastern banks
had never known the codfish run so well.
So the men pulled nets and laughed, and thought
of home, and dollars, and the pleasant violin
at Marm Brown's joint and the gals and gin.*

And Rudyard Kipling lived there in the summer of 1894 while researching *Captains Courageous*. He would describe the "ugly, sucking, dimpled water" of the Grand Banks.

In 1911, Gloucester fishermen and other New England fishermen united together with other regions to try to get Congress to ban trawlers. They knew even back then the results would destroy the oceans and its bounty.

Sadly, the Government did not act. Fish could now be caught at "14,000 times the capacity of the former sailing fleet." They worried about "wasteful destruction of immature fish."

Technology kept improving. The book does a great job of summarizing the steps and the lack of action. Now, "Gorton's of Gloucester" has been passed from one foreign multinational to another. It no longer buys any fish from Gloucester. Workers there do the breeding. Fishsticks are made with Pacific pollack.

T. H. Huxley once said it was impossible to overfish. Many people believed the oceans were infinite. They are not. Huxley would regret his statement. But other scientists have been warning about environmental destruction, and the forces of libertarianism go on with their destruction.

Quotas also failed. Cheating went on. Some species were thrown overboard. Only moratoriums seemed to offer any hope.

Hook fishermen also offered hope, but they used many hooks. What's the correct number? How do we regulate that?

The result is often a backlash against environmentalists and regulators. A further result is a libertarian government where anything goes.

Science faces difficult problems trying to get accurate information.

Then there is the desire for waterfront property. The shorelines are destroyed.

Seals eat fish wastefully. Older fishermen used to cut off their noses and get 5 dollars at City Hall. Now that's against the law.

The 1970 Clean Water Act helped tremendously.

Estimates of government subsidies to fisheries worldwide is estimated from 20 to 50 billion dollars. They perpetuate old and destructive methods of fishing.

Bluefin tuna are now one of the most hard-pressed species.

Somehow we need to solve this problem. I am not optimistic. Now we must deal with declining oxygen in the oceans due to climate change.

Thomas says

A great book about all the issues surrounding the fishing industry and the ports they call home.

Marie Hviding says

Extremely readable cultural history of the city of Gloucester and its relationship with the fishing industry. Kurlansky writes entertainingly about multiple topics and fills his book with interesting tidbits of knowledge.

Kim Zinkowski says

The book made me want to drive down to Gloucester and Rockport. Passed this on to Sandy.

Maire says

I'm not a big reader of non-fiction, but this book was pretty good. Kurlansky does a great job of using the personal stories of interesting characters to maintain your interest while he presents the facts. And the facts are quite disturbing. The focus seems to be on the vanishing culture of the small, working class, seaside fishing communities. This is, indeed, a sad story, but the real and quite possibly irreversible tragedy lies in the absolute devastation of the oceanic ecosystem. Modern fishing techniques have become so monstrously efficient that they decimate fishing populations while basically destroying everything in their paths. The various bureaucratic measures to ease overfishing are ineffective and sometimes utterly ridiculous; forcing fishermen to dump 2/3 of the fish they have already caught so they don't exceed their quota.

I enjoyed this book quite a bit, possibly because I have spent some time in many of the places he discusses. It will definitely change how I shop for seafood, too.

Jan says

I discovered this author when I read the book Cod that I really enjoyed.

The author, in writing about the history of Gloucester, captures the feel of the city and its inhabitants. He begins with the discovery of the town, and progressing through the history up until the book was written. The author shows some the difficulties that have occurred over the past several centuries.

From the history of the city, the author addresses the reasons that fish stocks are declining and discusses the bitterness found between government regulators and the people who earn a living fishing.

In addition, the book compares similar towns in other countries to allow the reader to realize that this is a problem that exists throughout the world. He also examines the effect of tourism on the towns and the problems tourism can create in working fishing villages. This is something I have never thought of.

This book is a good general look at the history of Gloucester, as well as fish depletion.

Rachel says

Between 3 and 3.5 stars. I loved the bits about Gloucester, which is the whole reason I bought the book. But, as I've found with the other books I've read by Kurlansky, he tends to go off on semi-unrelated tangents. The bits about Basque, Newlyn, and other fishing cities I would have found more interesting if he hadn't just thrown them in; they really only had tenuous connections/comparisons to Gloucester, and honestly could have been left out.

Kevin P. says

Still reading this. But, lived in Gloucester for five years and Kurlansky is thus far doing a great job of transcribing all the local lore while at the same time digging into the historical archives and putting it into global and historical context. Its a great (light) read. His "Cod" is a great book as well

Ken says

Highly readable account of the history and culture of Gloucester, Massachusetts. It's filled with tidbits I did not know about, not just about Gloucester's history as a fishing port but also as a haven for painters and writers. A lot of the details of "The Last Fish Tale" connect neatly with Kurlansky's other books about "Salt" and "Cod", being that salted cod was once a major product of the Gloucester port.

The book would have been hugely improved by the inclusion of a good map or two. The book text is often so geographically-centered, it's hard to get everything straight without seeing it on a map.

jersey9000 says

Man, I love this dude. His writing style, and choices of topics, are a great way to explore history. he has the ability to take one, seemingly singular topic, and apply it to the broader history of humanity in general. This was true in his previous works Salt and Cod, and it applies here as well. in a similar fashion to how the Big Oyster traced the development of NYC, using that as a lens to take in the idea of progress on a global scale, here the eye is focused firmly on Gloucester, to similar effect. If you are a fan of his books, you'll like it. I always walk away from his books feeling more connected to the world then before I had started them.

Chana says

Fascinating, but gloomy with the sea being so depleted of fish. It seems that the simple answer of outlawing bottom trawlers is too politically complex so instead they instituted ridiculous regulatory laws that result in huge amounts of fish, dead already, being thrown overboard due to the regulations of how much fish of which species are allowed to be brought in. No one, except those who are making a lot of money in the short term, want the fish and fishermen to go extinct. But that is what is happening. Tourism, real-estate and making regulatory laws regarding fishing are more lucrative.

What is so great about this book is all the history and the feeling of camaraderie with fishermen and love for the independent lifestyle that used to belong to fishermen. I loved all the anecdotes, the Gloucester stories. In a way I felt like I was looking at all of America through the lens of Gloucester and the fishing industry, what we used to be and what we have become. I don't want to see fishing in the hands of a few corporations any more than I wanted to see farming go that way. And yet, here we are. This isn't just America of course, the situation and the problems are world-wide.

Steve says

One of the best parts of my job as a narrator for the National Library Service for Blind & Physically Handicapped is reading well written non-fiction books on topics which I have some interest in, but would never take the time to read on my own. In investigating the decline of the fishing industry in Gloucester, MA (the oldest fishing port in America), Kurlansky embarks on a history of Gloucester and the Cape Ann peninsula that is richly detailed, and told with such narrative clarity and sureness of voice that the reader can truly discover this region themselves. Kurlansky uses a skilled hand to set up the circumstances of a history situation quickly and simply, then dramatically lead us through the highlights of the event. Some of his descriptions of the loss of lives and ships in Gloucester's early days are harrowing in their simplicity. His look at present day Gloucester is just as effective in it's impact, bringing us the thoughts and emotions of everyday people trying to sustain their lives in this unique fishing village culture.

Discussions about Gloucester's noted place among the art world (the light in Gloucester spurred a movement in maritime art) as well as capsule biographical sketches of the prominent artists might seem out of place in what is essentially a fishing book. But Kurlansky deftly ties these passages into the complex history of Gloucester's fishing community in a way that deepens our understanding of the people of the city.

A later section comparing the highs and woes of comparable fishing ports, both domestic and foreign, are just as clearly researched and carefully drawn as his main subject.

On top of all this, and to my mind most importantly, Kurlansky never lets us forget that there is a huge ecologic, economic, and political moral at the heart of this fish tale. Without seeming to take sides or push a specific agenda, but rather by presenting the hard facts of the story of Gloucester, Kurlansky makes the case that overfishing has had a tremendous effect on our seas. It would be impossible to come away from reading this book without the stark realization that something must be done to change the way humans fish.

And he does all this in a compact 250+ pages.

I've had Kurlansky's books *Cod* and *Salt* on my "to read" list for a while, but this is the first of his I've read. I'm even more excited now to move on to his other books.

Felicia says

My aunt recently purchased a condo in Gloucester and stumbled across this book in the local book store while the author was signing books. When I went to visit her this summer, she insisted I read it as well. Being a land lover (growing up in Wyoming doesn't exactly expose you to the ocean) and knowing very little of the fishing industry, I really thought this book was going to bore me to tears. However, I do love history, so I slid it into my work bag to read while on New Jersey Transit. His tale of Gloucester is engaging and exposed to me a disappearing way of life--fishing. And I'm not just talking about smelly docks, haggard men, nets and fishing poles. He digs into the culture and social history of the town, and also throws in a few recipes, which I'm considering testing out. He talks about the melting pot of artists, writers, poets and more who came to this quaint fishing town and found inspiration (the amazing light around the town, caused by the water that surrounds it, also helps). But what Kurlansky is really trying to teach you is that "each culture,

each way of life that vanishes, diminishes the richness of civilization.”

Pick it up, it's worth the read.

Anna says

I have enjoyed all of Mark Kurlansky's books, even the ones that dealt with subjects I am not normally drawn too. They are easy to read and extremely informative at the same time. Your heart really goes out to those families in places like Gloucester who have been forced to make such difficult and complex choices in order to survive. There doesn't seem to be much hope for responsible family fishing endeavors. The situation is made more tragic by the ignorance of most seafood consumers.
