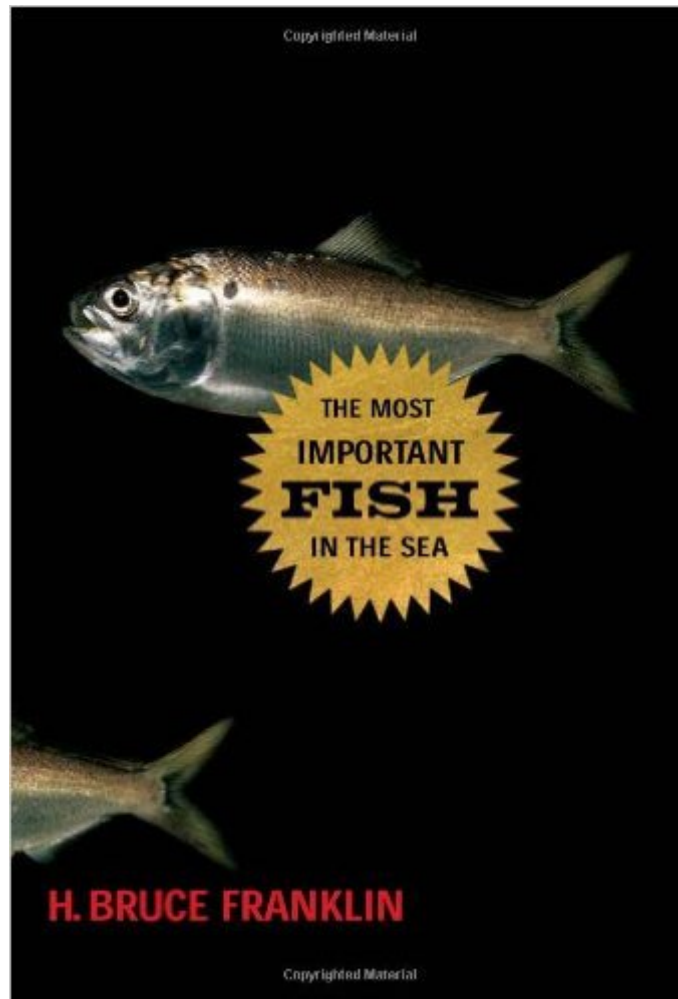


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The Most Important Fish In The Sea: Menhaden And America



Synopsis

In this brilliant portrait of the oceans' unlikely hero, H. Bruce Franklin shows how menhaden have shaped America's national and natural history, and why reckless overfishing now threatens their place in both. Since Native Americans began using menhaden as fertilizer, this amazing fish has greased the wheels of U.S. agriculture and industry. By the mid-1870s, menhaden had replaced whales as a principal source of industrial lubricant, with hundreds of ships and dozens of factories along the eastern seaboard working feverishly to produce fish oil. Since the Civil War, menhaden have provided the largest catch of any American fishery. Today, one company—Omega Protein—has a monopoly on the menhaden reduction industry. Every year it sweeps billions of fish from the sea, grinds them up, and turns them into animal feed, fertilizer, and oil used in everything from linoleum to health-food supplements. The massive harvest wouldn't be such a problem if menhaden were only good for making lipstick and soap. But they are crucial to the diet of bigger fish and they filter the waters of the Atlantic and Gulf coasts, playing an essential dual role in marine ecology perhaps unmatched anywhere on the planet. As their numbers have plummeted, fish and birds dependent on them have been decimated and toxic algae have begun to choke our bays and seas. In Franklin's vibrant prose, the decline of a once ubiquitous fish becomes an adventure story, an exploration of the U.S. political economy, a groundbreaking history of America's emerging ecological consciousness, and an inspiring vision of a growing alliance between environmentalists and recreational anglers.

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Customer Reviews

About 25 years ago, when I used to have the time to take a random vacation now and then, I was taking the ferry to Ocracoke Island at the southern end of the Outer Banks of North Carolina. Last ferry of the day. It was night. Suddenly, the ferry was surrounded by an unfathomable number of leaping, flopping fish. And the school went on, and on and on. I was absolutely stunned. It was the sort of experience that pioneers talked about when seeing the endless herds of buffalo on the Plains. I asked a local what kind of fish these amazing creatures were. "Ah, they're just menhaden." And that's the story on menhaden -- the amazing fish that everyone takes for granted. I bought this book (my wife: "You're buying a book on WHAT?") partly because my long-ago experience made me curious, and partly because of an interest in fisheries issues. And what a pleasure. First, I found out that, at least on the Atlantic and Gulf coasts, menhaden really are the most important fish in the sea. They convert the phytoplankton (small floating plant critters) into high-energy flesh, and thus become the primary food source for various sport fish, including bluefish. They also filter an astonishing amount of water (4 gallons per minute per adult fish), ensuring that sunlight penetrates deep enough to nurture eelgrass and that decaying phytoplankton don't choke all the oxygen out of the water. Even their dying is important -- bluefish rush into the giant schools and tear menhaden to bits, and the chunks the bluefish miss are a primary food source for crabs. That is, if we don't catch them all and feed them to pigs and chickens, which is pretty much what we've been trying to do in one form or another for a couple of centuries.

You can't go to your seafood store or fishmonger and order them, and it may well be that you have never even heard of them, but menhaden are, according to a new book, *The Most Important Fish in the Sea* (Island Press). Author H. Bruce Franklin also knew almost nothing about them until one day when he was fishing with friends at the mouth of the tidal Matawan Creek in New Jersey. He saw a spotter plane fly over the ocean to guide a boat to a school of menhaden, and then saw the boat haul in the entire school by a purse seine net. Franklin wasn't there to fish for menhaden himself; no angler does that, because menhaden stink and they are bony and "so oily that just about no human would chose to eat them". After the boat had taken its catch away, the bluefish and weakfish that Franklin might have been angling for were no longer there, because there was no menhaden for them to feed upon. It was not just a temporary void; industrial fishing for menhaden has been going on for a century and a half, efficiently wiping out the fish from waters off the east coast, and now working on the Gulf Coast variant, too. Menhaden does not just feed game fish; in an eye-opening book, Franklin shows that it is a keystone species and that its destruction is doing

far more than depriving other fish of their accustomed meals. He also gives a history of the menhaden fishery and the reactions to it, which parallels our emerging ecological awareness, and also our ineffective attempts to restore ecological balance. Menhaden get to be about a foot long. They look something like herrings and were often confused with them by the first settlers here. The oceans used to be full of them.

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