

CLEARING THE COASTLINE: THE NINETEENTH-CENTURY

Ecological and Cultural Transformation of Cape Cod

Matthew McKenzie

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Clearing the Coastline tells a fascinating story of ecological change, environmental knowledge, and social relations set within the context of Cape Cod's inshore fisheries. McKenzie, who teaches history at the University of Connecticut-Avery Point, has written an engaging, thoughtful, and sometimes surprising book — the kind of book that will remind readers of just how much there is to learn about the environmental and economic histories of Cape Cod, New England, and beyond.

The book's introduction frames its goals, which, broadly stated, include examining the history of inshore fishing on Cape Cod, and placing the actions of fishermen into larger ecological, social, and economic systems that better explain their roles in the decline of marine resources. The use and management of inshore fisheries, McKenzie argues, were initially guided by local, non-scientific environmental knowledge. Over time, however, local maintenance of the fisheries was undermined by mismanagement and misuse. The processes by which this occurred, however, would overtime be forgotten by the public — a loss of historical understanding that has shaped how Cape residents and historians alike have understood the region's history and marine ecology. These twin processes — the development of local, environmental knowledge and the subsequent loss of public memory — are core underlying themes that McKenzie weaves throughout the book.

Chapter 1 examines the ecology of inshore marine environments on Cape Cod, and their relation to Native life as well as colonial settlements. Despite an overriding emphasis placed in historical accounts on offshore banks fishing, we find that Europeans were keenly interested in building a base of knowledge about inshore marine resources as well, in large part because of the importance of these resources to colonial communities struggling to survive in a region with only marginal soils.

Chapter 2 traces efforts by Cape residents between 1650 and 1800 to balance the commercial demands of inshore fisheries with the long-term survival of local communities dependent upon inshore marine ecosystems. During this period Cape residents developed a modestly profitable inshore fishery distinct from the larger offshore cod industry. Management of inshore fishing was geared towards local uses and was guided by local knowledge of marine ecosystems built out of necessity to offset residents' poor agricultural prospects. McKenzie examines these patterns across two developed case studies, one focused on river herring, the other on a local dam controversy.

Chapter 3 is perhaps the strongest in the book. It traces the nineteenth-century transition of Cape Cod from a perceived wasteland (or at least an economic backwater) to what McKenzie calls a successful “workspace.” This transition hinged upon the economic reorganization and expansion of the offshore fishery as well as a nationalistic moralizing by artists and writers who portrayed the Cape’s progress as indicative of the American nation’s ability to prosper from the efficient use of nature. Here McKenzie offers an engaging look at the opening of new offshore cod fishing grounds, the emergence of an offshore mackerel fishery, and the development and use of new technologies and new inshore sources of bait. His exploration of artists and writers and their interpretations of nature, culture, and economic development is enlivened by fresh perspectives on the work of Henry David Thoreau and John Barber among others. Such individuals, McKenzie shows, often approached the Cape’s workspaces in a literal way, treating them as culturally affirming spaces rather than as mere fodder for the tourist trade.

Chapter 4 describes the social, economic, and ecological consequences of an emerging prosperity on the Cape during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. That prosperity was fueled in part by the expansion of offshore fishing, which drew upon bait fish from inshore environments. The intense pressures of the bait fishery prompted investments in artificial fish runs and other measures meant to enhance catches. Key among these were pound nets, structures similar to weirs, which were designed to capture fish in netted chambers. The consequences of this approach would have lasting effects on the regional landscape and economy, and would put pound fishermen in conflict with traditional inshore hook-and-line fishermen who gradually witnessed a decline not only in their economic viability, but a decline in resources and prosperity regionwide.

Chapter 5 examines responses to this decline from within political and scientific communities. McKenzie highlights criticisms of pound fishing, arguing that reactions against it and the declines many believed that it had inspired, reflected a deeper cultural debate about human-environment relations. On the one hand, pound fishing abstracted people from the environmental knowledge and sensitivity often gleaned from the intimacy of fishing by hook and line. On the other hand, new scientific and academic insights abstracted fishermen of all stripes into manageable numerical units, and erroneously formalized pound fishing as a viable and lasting approach to inshore fishing. The result, McKenzie argues, was a detrimental reduction of the role played by local knowledge in resource management.

Chapter 6 highlights the implications of this shift for the economy, population and identity of the Cape. McKenzie traces the decline in catch rates for key inshore bait species in considerable detail, noting its effects on hook-and-line fishermen, the vast majority of whom were forced to leave the Cape or to move into other work. In their wake came growing numbers of tourists, who brought with them a desire for pristine coastal imagery. That conception of the coast at times put visitors in conflict with the working landscape of weir fishermen. Artists often erased instances of human agency from their work, helping to redefine the shoreline from workspace to a space for leisure. This process, McKenzie argues, helped to erase the pound fishery from view and from the public mind, essentially erasing the industry which had been so instrumental in transforming land and life regionwide.

The book ends with a conclusion in which McKenzie builds on this process of erasure by

considering again the compelling question of how communities come to forget the historical and ecological changes that define their local place.

Clearing the Coastline succeeds on many fronts, including its depth of analysis, the clarity and organization of its chapters, and the concise development of its arguments. McKenzie successfully keeps readers on track, weaving arguments about knowledge construction and public memory deftly throughout the chapters. This helps to make *Clearing the Coastline* a book about more than fishing or Cape Cod alone. Rather, this is a book that readers will be able to extrapolate from to inform other work on places beyond New England and on topics other than marine resources.