

**Yulia Lajus and Dmitry Lajus, eds.**

*'More – Nashe Pole': Kolichestvennye dannye o rybnykh promyslakh Belogo i Barentseva morei, XVII – nachalo XX v. Materialy k ekologicheskoi istorii Russkogo Severa* ('The Sea is our Field': Quantitative Studies on Fisheries in the White and Barents Sea, 17th – Beginning of the 20th Centuries. Materials for the Environmental History of the Russian North) St Petersburg: European Institute in St Petersburg Press, 2010  
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Russia's environmental history (usually referred to in Russian as 'ecological history') is, in relation to the empire's vast size, extremely underdeveloped. Around Russia and elsewhere, the world's oceans and seas remain a last frontier of environmental history. Therefore, this slim collection of intensely-researched and carefully argued chapters on the long histories of Russian fisheries in the White and Barents Sea is a very welcome addition to the field. *'The Sea Is our Field'* is also testament to the strong work in environmental history being conducted at the European University in St. Petersburg and a model of some of the best scholarship to come out of the international, multidisciplinary History of Marine Animal Populations (HMAP) programme.

One of the book's principal strengths lies in the very difficult research that has been carried out in remote parts of Russia. The team of scholars who wrote *'The Sea is our Field'* scoured monastic and government records in Archangelsk and Murmansk, as well as St Petersburg and Moscow. While the records, extending back into the thirteenth century, are incomplete, they nonetheless provide a remarkably detailed picture of past fishing practices, fish numbers, and changes in Russia's Arctic ecosystem. This richness is explained by the early importance of salmon, herring and cod for the human history of the White and Barents Seas. Russian peasants began migrating north to fish these cold waters in the twelfth century, settling into a life dominated by the sea and developing a distinctive regional identity. They would eventually come to be known by the name *pomors* ('by the sea'). Monasteries, especially the influential Solovetsky Monastery on the White Sea, also became important regional players, serving as centres of growing wealth, vanguards of growing state power, and record-keepers extraordinaire. Atlantic salmon in particular brought huge dividends for peasants and monks – those from Lake Onegin graced the tsar's table. Tsarist officials also taxed this trade, cutting into frontier profits, but providing historians with an extra set of data to help reconstruct these histories.

What the data reveal is a trade that experienced frequent fluctuations. The mid-eighteenth century, for example, saw extremely low salmon catches after a high point around 1740. Another period of small catches came around 1870. While the numbers seem clear, it is more difficult to find clear explanations for these fluctuations. The book's authors surmise that low temperatures explain the 1740s and 1870s nadirs, while eight- to fourteen-year natural cycles are also visible. However, other changes, such as a decline in catches occurring between 1914 and 1920, almost certainly resulted from political factors, as Russia was caught up

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in world war and civil war. In the 1930s, during Stalin's Five-Year Plan, salmon numbers rebounded in a big way before the political collapse of the 1990s nearly terminated Russia's North Sea and White Sea salmon harvests. Altogether, the authors conclude, 'it is extremely difficult to determine the degree to which natural factors or human activity are responsible for fluctuations in numbers' (p. 78). Clearer is the fact that salmon runs throughout the region have declined since the beginning of record-keeping. Eighteen of 130 rivers studied no longer contain any salmon at all, while 42 have seen overall decreases.

The difficulties in correlating human and natural causes with fish fluctuations are compounded in the cases of cod and herring. Neither fish maintains fidelity to native streams like salmon, both migrate in unpredictable patterns, and both were fished intensively by foreigners from the sixteenth century. Russian records, therefore, give a particularly incomplete picture of these fishes' histories in the Barents and White Seas. Comparing temperatures and herring catches, for example, reveals no meaningful correlation. Still, the book uncovers intriguing stories around these fish as well. Cod and herring catches both increased dramatically with the introduction of deep-sea trawlers in the 1930s. Cod, in particular, became a strategic Russian fishery after the 1917 Revolution, when the Soviet Union was denied access to cod imports. Herring mostly fed local *pomors*, but as the Russian Arctic's human population grew quickly in the twentieth century even this demand proved a strain on fish numbers. Before the Revolution, trends are not as clear. The 1880s emerges as one of the best periods for cod catches, but a sudden reversal that decade was blamed by locals on an influx of Greenland seals. Lajus et al. think a larger hydrological change was more likely the cause. Whatever drove such fluctuations, one thing seems clear to the authors – *Pomors* and other Russians interested in the region rarely thought explicitly about conservation, but relied for a long time on the informal check of low human population to make these fisheries sustainable.

While there are times when the statistics become overwhelming, *The Sea is our Field* never gets caught up in a shortcoming HMAP is sometimes accused of – that it is simply a fish-counting operation. Instead, the book strikes the difficult balance between the rigorous quantitative research necessary to engage in serious conversations about past marine environments, while keeping an eye out for the distinctly human factors that impacted not only fish numbers, but the act of counting the fish as well. It makes a difference to the overall story how intensely Russians tried to monitor their catches, and what institutions they put in place to regulate their relationships with the ocean. No simple message emerges from the book – Russians are neither ecological heroes nor villains – but rather a deep sense of the complex relationships that result when multiple species try to ensure their own regeneration in the same cold seas.

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