

**Poul Holm**

## **An Environmental History of World Fisheries**

At Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society, I shall be working on a book with an ambitious and provisional title—*An Environmental History of World Fisheries*. I argue that the questions if, how, and when to fish have been answered very differently through history. In some cultures, fish and other marine products were considered essential while other societies literally turned their backs to the sea. Ocean life was impacted by human activities long before modern trawling. Similarly, a preference for fish as food shaped coastal settlements, shipping, and technology. Moreover, knowledge and understanding of oceans past may help us not only understand but even manage the current crisis in the oceans.

The problem of the ocean is that we do not see what is beneath the surface. On land we can see change with our own eyes. When we clear land for urban development, when we change agricultural practices, when we cut the trees or kill off the wolves, we see the changes. The environmental history of the land is well-documented, and archaeologists and historians have long been able to document and visualize past landscapes. What happens below the sea surface was largely hidden to the human eye until the invention of scuba diving and submarine photography. It is therefore perhaps not surprising that historians have largely neglected ocean life and how human history depends on it. It is only in the last 10 to 15 years that we have realized the potential of the records that are in fact preserved of how, when, and to what effect humans have impacted marine animals—and how, in that process, we were impacted as well.

Humans are driven not by what we eat but by what we want to eat, and fisheries have driven us far and wide. Fishing played a central role in the voyages of discovery and in the spreading of humans throughout the globe. Perceptions and fashions are fundamental to understand fishing matters. Those sentiments are what drove the Los Roques Indians to pluck the Queen Conchs off the bottom of the Caribbean Sea, they are vividly present when you look at the imagery of the palace of Knossos in the Mycenaean age, and it is evident from our focus on healthy seafood, sea air, diving and cruising. Fishing is by no means a unilinear, unstoppable sail towards emptying the oceans. But it is an environmental history full of conflict and choice.