

Chapter 14

Conclusion: Learning from Asian and Indo-Pacific Fisheries history

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Abstract Until very recently very little had been published on the history of Asian fisheries. This sorry state of neglect changed at one stroke with the publication of Butcher's 2004 study of South East Asian fisheries. The present volume demonstrates the breadth and depth of progress in recent years. It is high time that historians from outside the region take note and reconsider some of our well-established patterns of thought in light of what we may learn from these new perspectives.

Keywords Asian fisheries history · Indo-Pacific fisheries history · HMAP Asia · Marine environmental history

Until very recently it seemed as if Asian and Indo-Pacific fisheries had no history. Certainly, if one looks in the established literature there is an abundance of works on the Atlantic but apart from some ethnographic studies very little on the history of Asian fisheries. A basic work like Cushing's *The Provident Sea* (1988) opens with Hornell's descriptions of early twentieth century Indian fishing and has some text on the development of modern Japanese fisheries and the West Australian fishery for rock lobster. Cushing was conscious that 'much has happened elsewhere' but clearly had little information to hand. This sorry state of neglect changed at one stroke with the publication of Butcher's study of South East Asian fisheries, and quite rightly several contributors to the present volume identify this book as a path breaking work (Butcher 2004). Other more specialised works like David Luke Howell's study of nineteenth-century Japanese fisheries, Chen's study of twentieth-century Taiwanese fisheries, and Muscolino's history of fishing wars in Imperial and modern China have contributed to make Asian fisheries history an established academic field (Chen 2009; Muscolino 2009; Howell 1995). The present volume demonstrates the breadth and depth of progress in recent years. It is high time that historians from outside the region take note and reconsider some of our well-established patterns of thought in light of what we may learn from these new perspectives.

Concepts like diversity, communities, and colonialism are key to many contributions to this volume. In Chap. 2, Joseph Christensen attributes the late rise of Asian

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fisheries history to the complexity and richness of ecosystems and human cultures of the Indo-Pacific region, which defy a periodization according to the pattern historians often use for the Atlantic fisheries. Building on Butcher's work in relation to South East Asia, he observes that the Indo-Pacific region did not have one or two overwhelmingly important commercial fisheries, such as cod and herring in the Atlantic, around which a history may be structured. This point is well taken but looking at the richness of the present volume I wonder if that concentration on major commercial fisheries has not sometimes worked to the detriment of Western fisheries history by focusing our attention too narrowly. Asian fisheries historians demonstrate a keen awareness of species diversity and regional patterns. A recalibration of Western fisheries history with more attention to ecological specificities would certainly enrich the analysis and might provide us with some surprising insights. The diversity of Asian coastal fishing communities depended on rich and highly diverse local resource bases well into the twentieth century and many still do to this day. Most, but not all, Atlantic fishing communities had lost that local dependency by the late nineteenth century as they pursued the riches of the large commercial fisheries of the open sea. But rather than perceive of this development as an almost automatic effect of serial depletion, we may become more sensitive to the costs to local communities by learning from Asian fisheries history.

Several studies in this volume make clear the crucial importance of the Asian colonial experience for problems of availability of capital, the role of the state and the slow development of scientific support for the fisheries. Problems of colonialism and post colonialism are just as relevant for the Atlantic experience, and yet they remain understudied. Historians of early modern North American fisheries do of course take account of the colonial setting but we have still no good studies of European colonialism and the fisheries, and there is a glaring lack of studies of twentieth-century post colonialism and Atlantic fisheries, not least with regard to African and Latin American fisheries.

Atlantic historians will need to collaborate with Asian historians as we focus our attention on the globalization of fisheries in the second half of the twentieth century. The seas of the world have become one ocean in economic terms. Fisheries for tuna and sea cucumber have driven Asian vessels into the Atlantic just as earlier Atlantic whalers made the Pacific their home grounds. The global trade in marine foods is a vast and understudied field as indeed is the development of illegal and unregulated high-seas fisheries. The rise of aquaculture, not least in South East Asia, is a phenomenon of worldwide importance both as regards food security and changing urban life styles and has come at tremendous environmental cost but still lacks comprehensive historical treatment. The agenda for future collaboration between Western and Eastern historians is vast and rapidly expanding.

If there is much work to be done, it may be fair to ask if we are prepared to undertake the challenge? Without wanting to be too optimistic, I think the answer is that we know what needs to be done and the solution is largely up to ourselves. In the last 20 years, the discipline of history has changed dramatically and for the better. The discipline used to be mired in nationalistic agendas, constrained by language, and largely ignorant of what was written in other countries if not to speak of other

continents. If these problems are still with us, the good news is that new approaches such as ‘world history’ and ‘environmental history’ are changing the discipline for good. We now have journals of global and environmental history and historians are talking to and increasingly publishing with scholars from other disciplines. Most importantly, there has been a ‘historical turn’ of the natural sciences. In the last two or three decades we—citizens and politicians in rich and poor countries—have come to recognize that our planet is small and vulnerable. This recognition necessitates a historical perspective on modern existence. One of the most important themes of this revitalization of history is the relationship between humankind and nature. Collaboration across disciplines is recognized as essential to address problems of global environmental change, and history provides that insight into the long term, which is badly needed to provide a sense of proportion and understanding of when, how and why humans change perceptions and behaviour in our interaction with surroundings (Holm et al. 2013).

Marine environmental history is an example of this change, and the capacity building, which took place in the early years of the HMAP project, may offer some valuable experience for the future. HMAP was established as an alliance of people from many disciplines with a mission to do what had until then been unthinkable: to bring history, archaeology, biology, statistics and all other relevant disciplines together for a historical dimension to our understanding of human impact and dependence on the sea. No discipline trains students for the kind of ‘environmental literacy’ of the many disciplines, which may inform such a quest for new knowledge. As the very first step, we had summer schools to train a new generation of marine environmental historians and historical ecologists from around the globe to practice interdisciplinary collaboration. Some contributors to this volume benefitted from this experience and it has since sustained the Oceans Past conferences and the many outputs (more than 200 peer-reviewed papers) of the HMAP project. International summer schools are vital for future academic development of our understanding of the sea as they bring together students from across disciplines to learn how multi-disciplinary perspective may enrich their own disciplinary insights.

Another lesson, which I would draw from HMAP, is the key role of individuals and institutional commitment. Right from its establishment in 2000, HMAP was designed to be a global meeting ground for marine environmental history. In the first years, however, the Steering Group consisted of Western academics and in our search for Eastern partners we were defeated by our own ignorance, and tenuous leads to possible interested parties in Asia came to nought. It was only when Professor Malcolm Tull and the Asia Research Centre of Murdoch University took up the challenge that sustained research began on the questions raised by HMAP. Their commitment to build capacity for the study of the marine environmental history of the Asian and Indo-Pacific regions was crucial.

In future years, marine environmental history is likely to grow and benefit not only from a dialogue with the natural sciences as has been the case in the past 15 years or so, but increasingly also from dialogues within the humanities. History is not the only discipline to have been ‘enviored’. Environmental humanities is a broad concept, which encompasses the exciting developments happening also in

disciplines such as literature and media studies, art, philosophy and educational studies. As that dialogue across disciplines evolves, historians may find themselves no longer at one end of a spectrum of disciplines but perhaps as bridge-builders between analytical sciences and interpretative and creative practices of the arts. We all stand to benefit by bringing diverse forms of knowledge into play.

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