

**Eating the Ocean.** *Elspeth Probyn*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016. 200 pp.

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Elspeth Probyn proposes that “eating the ocean” in a responsible way is about more than the common tropes of eating lower on the food chain and buying fish from Marine Stewardship Council certified fisheries; it is a much broader concept of relatedness or relationships. Being mindful about fish or, better yet, the ocean means recognizing the multiple relationships within what others have called the ecosystem or the social ecological system. Not that Probyn never uses the term *ecosystem*; rather, it is that she prefers to examine multiple theoretical positions and concepts to elucidate the essentials of an ecosystem from different perspectives. Her work is, in that way, “good to think.”

Probyn has broad intellectual interests, and *Eating the Ocean* comes out of foci that include food consumption and production, theories of embodiment, and social science methodologies, among other topics. What struck me most about this book is its ability to blend and weave marine biology, feminist studies, queer theory, and a thorough understanding of ecosystem complexity into a usable framework for thinking about the sustainability (she notes the many problems with that term) of marine food webs, human communities, and economies. Of course, this complexity means that the most theoretical sections of the book, especially chapter 1, “An Oceanic Habitus,”

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require slow, careful reading. This is not a book to be skimmed. Readers will need to work their way through the various connections Probyn draws and think through how they feel about her assumptions. But they will be well rewarded for the time and thinking they invest. The strength of the book, however, comes especially in the case studies in chapters 2 to 5. Each takes a marine species and uses a mix of ethnography, oral histories, archaeology, literature, historical accounts, and marine biology to embody and center the theoretical points made in the introduction, “Relating Fish and Humans,” and the first chapter. The five-page conclusion, “Reeling It In,” then draws it all together for the reader. Illustrative photos and graphics are provided throughout.

The first case study, “Following Oysters, Relating Taste,” is framed through the concept of taste “as a connector between history, place, things, and people” (59). Probyn takes us from Scotland to the US Pacific Northwest to Australia, as we ponder the subtle differences in flavor of various species of oyster, reflect on the many cultural properties assigned to oysters (their status as aphrodisiacs, for instance), learn about oyster zoology (they all begin life male and may at any point in their lives, depending on environmental factors, suddenly one season lay eggs), and see how some specific communities and local economies are using oysters to support livelihoods and cultures.

“Swimming with Tuna” focuses on the bluefin tuna, a powerful species that traverses the globe and an iconic species for sushi lovers worldwide. In the wild, bluefin tuna swim at speeds of up to 50 miles per hour. They are both caught wild and ranched. Ranching involves catching smaller tuna live and raising them to full adult size in large ocean pens. Financially, this makes sense, because bluefin tuna are managed via individual transferable quotas set as pounds of fish, so if you catch your pound limit in smaller fish and feed them up to full size in pens, you end up with many more pounds’ worth of fish to sell. To Probyn, the transformation of bluefin tuna extraction is “a story

of technology and taste" (85). Once rejected by Japanese as too fatty and bloody for sushi, bluefins are now revered as the premium sushi species, with a single fish selling for US\$1.76 million in 2013. Because of the cultural importance of the bluefin to Japan and its economic value on the world market, subsistence fishermen in West Africa find their quotas being squeezed even though they are far from the primary source of tuna mortality. We also learn of the role in these issues played by the international organizations that govern tuna fishing. We visit South Australia, where increasing costs and restrictions on fishing have led one local tuna baron to leave fishing and turn to ranching, with a side business where tourists swim with the bluefins.

In "Mermaids, Fishwives, and Herring Quines," Probyn notes that the iconic fisherman is in fact a man (sidebar: many English-speaking women who fish prefer to be called fishermen rather than the gender-neutral fishers that Probyn uses), though this ignores the fact that much of the world's inshore fishing is done by women, and women are often the fish sellers, the bookkeepers, and the processing workers who deal with the fish once landed. This focus on men also conveniently forgets that women are most often the food buyers and food preparers. These issues frame a historical study of the roles of women in Scottish and Canadian fishing communities. In 19th-century Scotland, women abandoned their role as net tenders and began baiting hooks and hauling boats, even carrying the men through the surf to their boats so the men wouldn't get their feet wet. As the fish moved along the coast, the women went with them. In these large groups of ~~unmarried~~ women living, working, and traveling together, women had a freedom from male control they had never before experienced. In Newfoundland, women have historically worked in the fish-processing plants and done the books for their fishermen husbands. When the great cod crisis of the 1990s came, and the cod fisheries upon which most Newfoundland communities depended were closed

indefinitely, some thought to ask why no one had taken advantage of the knowledge women would have had about the size of catches and the size of the fish that were being landed. The answer lay in local culture and gender relations, where women were assumed not to be worth asking about fish.

“Little Fish” takes us from wild-caught forage fish in the United States and Peru to farmed forage fish in Asia, but the case study focuses on the Peruvian anchoveta (a species of anchovy) to illustrate the idea of eating lower on the food chain as one way to be more sustainable. This concept of eating from lower trophic levels is not new, but here Probyn provides insight into a campaign that succeeded in changing the way that Peru catches and eats these small fish, which form huge schools off the Peruvian coast. La Semana de la Anchoveta, Anchoveta Week, began with a marine biologist and a well-known chef who convinced the president of Peru and his cabinet to eat anchovetas on television, and they liked them. Subsequently, the president signed a law “affirming the strategic importance of promoting the consumption of anchoveta and its nutritional properties among Peruvians” (147), and the government invested 30 percent of its food security budget toward producing and promoting anchovetas. The Peruvian anchoveta fleet was transformed from one focused on catching fish for fertilizer and animal feed to one focused on catching fish for human consumption. This type of large-scale transformation benefits the ocean and the people, much more so than the industrial reduction plants that employ few people and waste so much to provide animal feed and nutraceuticals. But remaking the fleet and dietary habits required large amounts of time, money, and planning.

*Eating the Ocean* offers a provocative perspective on how we consume the ocean and how we can do better.