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The Big Oyster: History on the Half Shell by Mark Kurlansky

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country comparisons to be made in addition to providing insights into the status of biodiversity in these countries and the measures these countries have put in place to stem the loss of biodiversity. The book has an excellent stand alone concluding chapter that nicely distills the key findings and sets out their policy implications. The book is however repetitive in several places and rather weak on theory and statistical analyses. Some of its recommendations (e.g., beheading and life imprisonment of those who violate wildlife laws) are absurd and unjustified. Overall, however, the book is useful and informative and will prove valuable to students, academics, researchers, natural resource managers, and policy makers.

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The Big Oyster: History on the Half Shell. By Mark Kurlansky. New York: Ballantine Books, 2006. Pp. 336. \$14.95 paperback.

Oyster Shell Shocked

Mark Kurlansky has astutely recorded contemporary life for a quarter century. An inveterate New Yorker, gourmet, and author of a dozen books, Kurlansky has fascinated readers with tales that range across a broad spectrum, which includes cod, salt, Basques, European Jewry, and the Caribbean Islands. The writer has specifically authored excellent work on environmental issues and the natural world.

Historians, oyster lovers, and Manhattan aficionados eagerly anticipated Kurlansky's most recent work, titled *The Big Oyster*. This volume is a compendium on *Crassostrea Virginica*, better known as the Eastern Oyster. The species is part of the bivalvular mollusk family, which means that oysters are two-shelled creatures. Filter feeders, the bivalves pump water through their bodies and extract plankton and additional microscopic organisms for sustenance. The mollusks spend virtually their whole existence in beds lining the bottoms of shallow estuaries and rivers.

Crassostrea Virginica is fascinating and not only for reasons of science. Kurlansky attempts to demonstrate all the ways that the miraculous bivalve has affected New York's origins and spectacular development. The writer adroitly weaves into his story oyster tales that implicate many legendary venues and revered figures of American, but especially Manhattan, history. For example, the author describes how the plentiful oysters thriving in waterways around the island enabled its Native American inhabitants to prosper, sustained the Dutch colony (which Peter Stuyvesant established after purchasing Manhattan from the Lenape Indians) and the English settlers who later governed New York, and supported Americans who populated Manhattan after the Revolution.

Kurlansky also regales readers with stories of how Abraham Lincoln shipped the mollusk to Illinois for political events, Dr. Samuel Johnson fed the bivalve to his cat, and "Diamond Jim" Brady commenced every meal with six dozen oysters.

Although the ease with which New York City dwellers were able to capture the abundant shellfish meant that oysters had greater responsibility than numerous creatures for supplying those residents' dietary needs, the implicit suggestion that the bivalve can explain all of Manhattan history is somewhat hyperbolic. Certain events important in New York's birth and its stupendous development occurred during the months that lack an "R," when oysters are essentially inedible. Alas, the oyster cannot explicate all that happened to Manhattan.

However much *The Big Oyster* falls short as an historical explanatory account of New York's origins and development, the book succeeds in myriad ways, especially as a tour de force of *Crassostrea Virginica arcane*. Kurlansky recounts in consummate detail the oyster's life cycle, from birth in Atlantic Coastal bays and rivers through death, and much in addition that involves bivalvular nascence, adolescence, and maturity. He surveys how the mollusk reproduces with millions of eggs that become spat; the ways that oysters surmount the enormous hurdles to reaching adulthood; and what, when, and how the bivalve eats. The writer correspondingly analyzes the barriers to the creature's survival, particularly "over oystering," environmental pollution, and parasites, such as Dermo and MSX. Kurlansky also thoroughly evaluates the species' physical characteristics.

The author meticulously reviews how to catch the mollusk; assesses the required paraphernalia, including boats, tongs, and waders; and examines the phenomena, namely wind and turbidity, that confound success. *The Big Oyster* mentions bivalves that live off the East, Gulf, and West coasts, but its focus is New York's environs. The volume scrutinizes how to clean, prepare, cook, and eat the mollusks, yet Kurlansky emphasizes gluttony in their consumption.

The striking particularity of *The Big Oyster* is simultaneously the monograph's greatest virtue and its principal weakness. The book does not exactly have a plot, unless hundreds of tales about devouring oysters constitute a storyline. Many readers could be satiated after ten or twenty accounts of mollusk consumption. The volume is not particularly well organized and it is replete with jarring disjunctures; the writer abruptly switches gears often in the same paragraph and even in mid-sentence. Some may find the monograph excessively cute, exemplified by such chapter headings as "A Molluscular Life," "The Fecundity of Bivalvency," and "Ostreamaniacal Behavior." Perhaps this book's most delicious irony is that its author is guilty of the very chauvinism that he so vociferously argues Manhattanites practice, a factor perfectly captured by the chapter title "Egocentric New Yorkers."

The Big Oyster is at once too much and too little. Over the top Manhattan, insufficient mollusk. Kurlansky offers glancing treatment of the science, law, and regulatory controls that apply to the bivalve; slights the renowned Chesapeake Bay oyster fishery; dismisses mollusks in the Gulf Coast, especially the blow that Hurricane Katrina dealt the region; and ignores West Coast bivalves. The writer also neglects the period after 1930, although he does explore oyster catchers' deft switch to cultivation when they realized that centuries of Gotham pollution and excess had decimated the region's natural oyster beds. Missing from the account is how New York might have prevented or limited oyster devastation wrought by eons of gluttony, filth, and crushing population expansion. Kurlansky, therefore, laments oyster's demise, but he never squarely confronts ways that Manhattan could have rectified or ameliorated the profound decline, thus exuding an air of inevitability.

Kurlansky seems unclear about precisely what he intends *The Big Oyster* to be. The volume is one part New York excess, one part cultural history, and one part ecological tract. In attempting to realize so many goals, *The Big Oyster* attains none of the objectives particularly well. The book ultimately fails as cultural commentary, an attribute most trenchantly revealed by contrasting the volume to this genre of cult(ure) classics. *The Big Oyster* compares unfavorably with *Beautiful Swimmers*, *The Founding Fish*, and even *Oyster Wars*.

In the end, readers who hope to discover how the venerable oyster prompted the rise and supported the incredible growth of New York may find *The Big Oyster* disappointing. However, neophytes and even individuals who are experts on *Crassostrea Virginica* will find Mark Kurlansky's new monograph a captivating environmental cautionary tale.

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The Antiquities Act: A Century of American Archaeology, Historic Preservation, and Nature Conservation. Edited by David Harmon, Francis P. McManamon & Dwight T. Pitcaithley. Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 2006. Pp. 264. \$45.00 cloth; \$19.95 paper.

The National Antiquities Act of 1906 was a visionary piece of legislation that created our National Park system and gave legal protection to our historic landmarks and indigenous ruins. This collection of essays gives the reader a glimpse into the Act's origins in the Progressive Era of America history, but a mere glimpse it is. The best essays are grounded in the turn of the century's complex milieu and acknowledge the influence of industrialization and colonialism. Other essays offer a detailed account of