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***Politics and Conservation:
The Decline of the Alaska Salmon***

By

RICHARD A. COOLEY

New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc. 1963

Pp. xxi, 230, \$5.00

In all the stormy history of conflict over the conservation of natural resources, few cases are more charged with emotion than that of the Alaska salmon. Its economic importance to the nation is substantial, and to Alaska it remains the most important single non-government source of income and employment. Surely this would be an instance where conservationists, trained fishery scientists, the regulatory agency, and the business firms dependent on the resource could have been expected to make common cause. But they did not. The decline of the salmon resource in Alaska is one of the serious failures of natural resources management in the United States. In recent years production has been less than half the level that was once achieved, and some major stocks are producing only about one fifth as much as they once did. Production rose, leveled out, and fell drastically during the period that the federal government regulated the fishery (and this was the only fishery over which it had regulatory authority). Moreover, there are no "external" factors to blame. Sparsely populated Alaska has not yet faced serious problems of pollution, dam construction, or deforestation, and the decline in catch started long before the Japanese high seas salmon fishery became an important factor.

After such a failure we urgently need to examine the causes, if only to avoid repetition of the disaster. Cooley has dug deeply into the history of the management and exploitation of this magnificent resource. He traces the development from the aboriginal period through the expanding commercial fishery period (1880 to 1920), the period of peak production (1920 to 1940), and the subsequent decline. He has reviewed most thoroughly the voluminous federal records and the accounts in *Pacific Fisherman* of the annual controversies over regulations.

He seeks a broad understanding of all factors—biological, political, and economic—but discusses most thoroughly the political factors and least thoroughly the biological ones. He concludes that

there is a great need for more complete biological information, that the prevailing free and common fishery is economic nonsense, that the federal control was politically unbalanced in favor of non-Alaskans, and that the federal government neglected social factors almost completely in its regulations. He holds out no promise that the state will do better than the federal government unless it "is willing to embark upon a complete reformulation of the conservation problem in terms of economic, political, social and biological reality."

Cooley's presentation is at its best in the formulation of the peculiar economic characteristics of the resource that make it so vulnerable, and in the thorough review and documentation of the political history of regulation. It suffers, however, from some deficiencies that deserve mention.

First, Cooley relied almost entirely on the record of federal hearings and sought little help from government or industry people who lived through much of the history. He gives no specific credit to any Fish and Wildlife Service or industry executives, and an informal canvass failed to reveal any senior executive who had discussed the work with him.

Second, and perhaps as a result of his failure to get to know the government and industry people, he tends throughout to characterize the industry people as entirely selfish; government officials as entirely ineffectual (or even dishonest); and Alaskan residents as entirely reasonable and just. Emotionally loaded words and phrases, such as "the rapaciousness of the canners," "the fish trust," "the absentee capitalists," and "the creek robbers," appear frequently.

Cooley would have made his point more effectively had he avoided these loaded phrases, for the story is grim enough in itself. Nature had very little to do with the decline of the salmon catch; the roots must lie somewhere in the relationship of industry and government. The disturbing evidence of the inability of able men in both fields, well aware of the danger to the resource, to overcome the shortsightedness and complacency of the majority (and of the occasional dominance of the regulator by the regulated) might better be allowed to tell its own story, without the added emphasis that betrays bias. The most important lesson to be learned is not that canners sought to maximize their own short-run profits, or that government seemed powerless in the face of intense political pressure to check the process. Rather, it is the complete failure to attack effectively the problem of amassing enough scientific knowledge of the salmon

to make clear the long-run interest of both industry and public in precise regulation and to permit development of sound methods.

There also appears to be some inconsistency in Cooley's handling of the economics of the situation. The excellent and persuasive argument of chapter three indicates that free entry to the salmon fishery guarantees economic hardship to fishermen and serious or even mortal damage to the various salmon populations. Yet in later chapters, he seems to imply that the popular Alaska solution—prohibition of traps and more fishing opportunities for local owners of mobile gear—would not produce the same devastating effects. Surely the post-trap experience of the salmon fishery along the entire Pacific Coast argues the reverse. A fishery with excessive numbers of small, inefficient units is no less sick than one with excessive numbers of traps.

We offer these criticisms only because the book is otherwise good enough and important enough to warrant careful reading by every serious student of resources management. There are valuable lessons to be learned from Cooley's study, and precious little time to learn and profit from them.

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