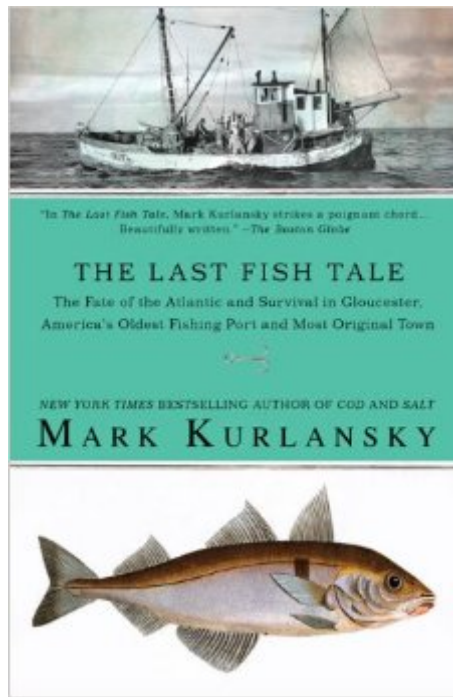


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# The Last Fish Tale



## Synopsis

"A marvelous, compelling tale"(Rocky Mountain News) from the New York Times bestselling author of Salt and Cod. Gloucester, Massachusetts, America's oldest fishing port, is defined by the culture of commercial fishing. But the threat of over-fishing, combined with climate change and pollution, is endangering a way of life, not only in Gloucester but in coastal cities all over the world. And yet, according to Kurlansky, it doesn't have to be this way. Engagingly written and filled with rich history, delicious anecdotes, colorful characters, and local recipes, The Last Fish Tale is Kurlansky's most urgent story, "an engrossing multi-layered portrait of a fishing community that can be read for pure pleasure as well as being a campaigning plea for the environment" (Financial Times).

## Book Information

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Ecology > Oceans & Seas

## Customer Reviews

As I read the book, and as I sit here writing this review, my windows are open to the sea air and the shouts and cheers of crowds on Pavillion Beach as they watch the Greasy Pole Competition here in Gloucester, the competition that Mark Kurlansky writes about in the opening chapter of "The Last Fish Tale". "Viva San Pietro!" The cry goes up over and over. "Hooray for Saint Peter!" But these days the local fishermen here need more help from St. Peter to keep their way of life alive than to save them from dangers of the sea. With his usual wit, elegance, and deep intelligence, Kurlansky has crafted a book that is fascinating on many levels. He begins his tale with an early history of Gloucester, including how the town got its name, and moves gracefully through the centuries salting his story with anecdotes about people that may seem like colorful characters to most readers but

are friends and neighbors to me. Kurlansky talks about "Gloucester Stories". Those stories abound and flourish --- stories about fishermen and artists and writers and inventors --- each with their own particular perspective on America's Oldest Seaport. I came to Gloucester some 15 years ago because I was writing a book steeped in the maritime history of the Great Lakes (The Old Mermaid's Tale). I fell in love with a Gloucester fisherman and am still here. That is my Gloucester Story. It could be the same for many of the people Kurlansky tells of, the fishermen who came from Sicily in search of a better life, the artists who came because of the beautiful light, the writers who came because of the peace of the sea. For every story Kurlansky tells I can think of a dozen more but the reader will be given a delicious taste --- and no shortage of delicious recipes --- as they read this small, but richly varied book. The final chapters of the book are the most poignant. What is to become of Gloucester and all that is Gloucester? Using examples of other fishing towns in England and France, Kurlansky offers possibilities and hope that Gloucester can stay Gloucester but one has to wonder for how long? In a nation that is so hungry for authentic experience that we have spawned an entire industry of "reality entertainment" (sounds like an oxymoron to me) Gloucester and its working waterfront seems too precious to be lost but with an economy in decline and a desperate need to broaden the tax base it seems that Gloucester could well turn into a parody of itself --- a working seaport theme park or, worse, just another Boston bedroom community. "The Last Fish Tale" is an important book and Kurlansky has offered us much to think about. To Gloucesterites it might seem to only scratch the surface but there are other excellent books written by Gloucester fishermen, like Peter Prybot's *Lobstering Off Cape Ann: A Lifetime Lobsterman Remembers* or Mark S. Williams' *F/V Black Sheep*, to fill that gap. I hope that Kurlansky's book will find a much wider audience than just here on Cape Ann and that, in reading it, people will realize that, as he says in the final paragraphs of the book, "every view of the world that becomes extinct, every culture that disappears, diminishes the possibility of life."

Walking the fine line between those who want to preserve the renowned fishing industry of Gloucester, Massachusetts, long into the future and those who see that industry as already nearly dead, NY Times reporter Mark Kurlansky examines the history of the community, its ties to the sea, and its very uncertain economic future. At the same time, he also worries about the future of the Atlantic Ocean itself as a resource, one now so endangered that unless the federal government institutes "overall eco-system management," and not just quotas on specific catches, it will soon die. The government has wasted too much time on short-term "remedies," he believes, and has done no comprehensive long-term planning for the eco-system on which the industry depends. Ultimately,

the "scientists" responsible for the health of our ocean have made too many mistakes, and fishermen in Gloucester and elsewhere are paying the price. Kurlansky describes Gloucester (pronounced "GLOSS-ter") from its earliest discoveries by the Vikings to its first settlements, emphasizing its colonial fishing industry, a time in which people would routinely catch cod that were four or five feet long and halibut weighing 200 - 400 pounds. Between colonial times and 1991, when the unexpected "Perfect Storm" struck, the city has lost six thousand Gloucester fishermen and many hundreds of vessels at sea, yet the fishing industry persists. The evolution of large trawlers and draggers, and the arrival of mammoth ships from Japan and Russia to fish just offshore, led the local industry to try to protect itself by getting exclusive fishing zones and the two-hundred mile limit established, but "[continued] stern dragging has endangered two-thirds of the world's fish stocks," and the prospects for the future look bleak. Waves of Jewish, Sicilian, and Portuguese immigrants have kept the city socially vibrant, and the fishing boats filled with willing workers. Their cultural contributions and festivals, especially St. Peter's Fiesta in July, described in detail here, are part of the fabric of society and a fully-attended joy for the entire community. The city also has a long history as an art colony, with Fitz Hugh (Henry) Lane, Winslow Homer, William Morris Hunt, Childe Hassam, John Henry Twachtman, Emile Gruppe, and even Edward Hopper taking advantage of the special light reflected off the sea to give luminosity to their paintings. T. S. Eliot vacationed in Gloucester, Rudyard Kipling wrote "Captains Courageous" while living in Gloucester, and NY playwright Israel Horovitz has produced his plays in Gloucester for almost forty years. Still, the community sees itself almost exclusively as a fishing port and wants to remain one. In the 1980s, the fishing community convinced the city to zone the entire waterfront for commercial maritime activities only. "Someday fishing will improve," they believe, and then they will have the land they need to expand. "Otherwise it will turn into Newport." With these zoning regulations in place, there's no possibility that that will happen or that tourism will become an industry to fill the economic gap left by the decimated fishing industry. There are no docking facilities for pleasure boats, and the extensive waterfront is a weedy wasteland with no new building and no hotel. In 2008, the battle continues to rage between the "preservationists" who want to preserve the fishing industry and its control of the waterfront and those who believe that a mixture of uses might better serve both the community and the economy. So far the fishermen are hanging tough, hoping for a renewal of their fishing stocks.

n Mary Whipple  
Bear of the Sea : Giant Jim Pattillo and the Roaring Years of the Gloucester-Nova Scotia Fishery by Joe Garland  
North Shore Fish by Israel Horovitz  
North Shore Fish, film with Tony Danza  
Captains Courageous, with Lionel Barrymore, Spencer Tracy  
The Perfect Storm [Blu-ray] with George Clooney

Anyone with a passion for coastal United States will appreciate Mark Kurlansky's portrait of Gloucester. He captures the essence of Gloucester and at the same time the challenges of its fishing community. While most news journalists simply write off this great working port, Kurlansky leaves us with an appreciation of not only Gloucester's robust past but its link to today. The Last Fish Tale is tough to put down once you start. The Last Fish Tale: The Fate of the Atlantic and Survival in Gloucester, America's Oldest Fishing Port and Most Original Town

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