

# Jenn Thornhill Verma. Cod Collapse: The Rise and Fall of Newfoundland's Saltwater Cowboys

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[See table of contents](#)

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Jenn Thornhill Verma. *Cod Collapse: The Rise and Fall of Newfoundland's Saltwater Cowboys*. Halifax, NS: Nimbus Publishing, 2019.

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If ever there was a fish made to endure, it is the Atlantic cod. . . . But it has among its predators — man, an open-mouthed species greedier than cod. (Mark Kurlansky, *Cod: A Fish That Changed the World*, 1997)

By the end of *Cod Collapse*, we are very much aware of how a single species — cod, a fish that once teemed in the tens of millions in the waters surrounding the island of Newfoundland — has become commercially extinct. The “openmouthed” greed and its attendant unrelenting attack on cod are well documented in this thoughtfully written book by Jenn Thornhill Verma. Following well in the wake of Newfoundland and Labrador’s 1992 cod moratorium, the work focuses on the countless fortunes harvested from this single species over the centuries, while profiling cross-generational lifeways and traditions, as well as the strength of the Newfoundland character that emerged from engaging in such an enterprise. The book is very much a story about cod, but so too is it about the lifeways and history of a province, and the individual and collective fates of those whose lives were and are inextricably tied to it.

*Cod Collapse* is divided into three parts: Roots, Resurgence, and Revival. For each section different aspects of the cod fishery are addressed in reference to specific time periods, from earliest recorded times to the present. This is a history in brief, but it is also a fairly thorough one. The book’s three divisions roughly correspond to distinctive periods in the Newfoundland fishery: the lengthy era of bounty and success (*circa* 1500–1970s); the short but devastating era of decline leading up to the moratorium (*circa* 1950s to the late 1980s); and the post-moratorium era when the revival of the species remains undetermined (1992 to the present).

The cod moratorium, initially set as a two-year term, remains

intact some three decades later with no clear indication of how long it will remain as such. In its heyday, the fishery not only delivered affordable seafood to global markets, but provided tens of thousands of direct and indirect jobs to those whose families, in many cases, had fished for generations. Considered the “largest mass layoff in Canadian history,” the closure of the fishery was a devastating blow to those directly/indirectly involved in the industry. Verma ponders as to why no one has been held accountable for such gross mismanagement of both the species and the industry built around it. But there is much difficulty with pointing fingers since many people, in many countries, over many years all had a hand in it. Like others, Verma maintains that in post-Confederation Newfoundland and Labrador (1949 onward) a combination of advancements in vessel and gear technologies, foreign fishing, poaching/overfishing, and ineffective, inadequate, and often untimely government policies contributed to the current situation. However, Verma sees the failure of various levels of government and their respective agencies to accurately measure cod reproduction and stock health against the rate at which they were being caught as one of the primary reasons behind the potentially irreversible decline of the fishery.

Verma’s narrative weaves back and forth across time and space, drawing on multiple voices, past and present, some of whom offer considered opinions and thoughtful predictions about fishing in general, cod in particular, and at times submit observations and predictions about the future of the Newfoundland fishery and its people. The story is very much about cross-generational adversity, survival, and persistence, consistent themes in many stories about Newfoundland and its peoples. While Verma traces the decline of cod, she also documents how Newfoundlanders have reacted to and recovered from various forms of natural disasters, trauma, discrimination, and near economic collapse. The creativity, ingenuity, and dogged persistence typically associated with the resilient Newfoundlander — and evident within her own family (Pop) — in combination with the voices of business owners/operators, visual and recording artists, and labourers (old and

young), remind us that, although the fish have failed, the Newfoundland character somehow persists. Importantly, however, band-aid solutions that may have worked in the past fail to meet sufficiently the needs of the post-moratorium era, when Newfoundlanders face increasingly challenging issues to which there appear to be fewer viable solutions. But there are some solutions.

Although much of the book is concerned with well-worn topics, Verma brings a broader perspective to the many trials and tribulations, rewards and triumphs that a life attached to the water often brings. The content of the book, drawn from the representative voices of family members and others, is documented through various academic and other sources, including memoirs, historical/archival texts, and statistical and field-based ethnographic data. These sources provide a contextualized, well-rounded, and multi-perspectival story about cod, the Newfoundland spirit, and much-needed lessons about accountability, sustainability, and ecology. Anyone seeking out statistical data on either the historical or recent fishery will find ample information in these pages along with comprehensive endnotes and a full bibliography of sources.

I do have a few criticisms of this work, however. First, the stereotyping of Newfoundlanders, the island's attachment to the cod fishery, and the fulsomeness of outport life are overdrawn. A romanticization of former times and a nostalgia for a simpler life are scattered through much of the book. Those familiar with Newfoundland and Labrador tourism ads may find some commonality here. Accordingly, there is no mention of the urban lifestyles enjoyed by the majority of Newfoundlanders whose closest experience with and appreciation for cod may possibly be its arrival on a plate. Verma yearns for a long-past fishing community whose social, cultural, and economic practices derived from isolation and seclusion as much as anything else. By and large, information and marine technologies have stepped in where fishers used to tread. Second, while cod did sustain many generations of rural Newfoundlanders in many ways, since the 1980s jobs in the oil and gas sector have wooed many away from the fishery, but not necessarily

from outport life. Until recently (2016 and following), the oil and gas industry (primarily at home and in Alberta) allowed for rural sustainability. Historically, while the fishery did add to the persistence of rural, settler Newfoundland society and culture substantively, it has not done so in recent times. Currently, out-migration from many of the island's bays to urbanized centres has more to do with a downturn in oil and gas industries: families can no longer afford outport life. Understandably, as other industries are not the focus of *Cod Collapse*, they may have been avoided. But love it or hate it, the significant contribution of oil and gas industries to the province's economy deserves a mention.

In conclusion, this is a well-researched and well-written account of Newfoundland's cod fishery and its eventual, and possibly conclusive, demise. This book will appeal broadly to academics, researchers, and the casual or inquisitive reader who may wish to learn something about cod fishing and the island of Newfoundland.

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