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## **Menhaden matter, and they're in trouble**

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ReviewEcology  
>>> The Most Important Fish in the Sea  
Menhaden and America  
By H. Bruce Franklin  
Island Press / 252 pages / \$25

Last July, then-Maryland Gov. Robert L. Ehrlich Jr. posed for cameras beside environmentalists on a scenic bluff overlooking the [Chesapeake Bay](#) and made what everyone present claimed was an historic announcement.

With Virginia Gov. Tim Kaine live on a teleconference screen at [Sandy Point State Park](#) in Annapolis, the governors proclaimed that they were going to save the bay by imposing a cap on fishing for menhaden.

Why worry about menhaden? They are cigar-sized, oily, bony, notoriously smelly fish that no human would want to eat. They're the Rodney Dangerfields of the aquatic world - getting no respect, with their bulging eyes, oversized heads, pudgy bodies and unsavory reputation.

But menhaden are also a vital food for predators such as bluefish and striped bass, providing the main nourishment for several fish species along the Atlantic Coast. And swirling schools of the tiny fish serve as vacuum cleaners for the [Chesapeake Bay](#), eating up algae and cleaning the waters.

Although few people have heard of them, menhaden are "the most important fish in the sea," as author H. Bruce Franklin describes them in his book by the same title, published last month by Island Press.

Franklin, a professor of English at Rutgers University and a cultural historian, makes a convincing case that overfishing menhaden is like removing the liver from the oceans. Removing these fish eliminates a filter system that all the other creatures need to survive. He also argues that the "cap" imposed on menhaden fishing last summer was really a hoax. The fine print doesn't force the fishing industry to do anything - meaning that the menhaden fleets can continue to rip the liver out of the [Chesapeake Bay](#) and Atlantic Ocean.

"If a healthy person needs a fully functioning liver, consider someone whose body is subjected to unusual amounts of toxins - just like our Atlantic and Gulf coasts," he writes. "But now there are ominous signs that we may have pushed our most important fish to the brink of an ecological catastrophe."

Franklin's book on the runty menhaden is a killer whale achievement. It's an eloquent call to end the phony business of incremental regulation of fisheries that are rapidly being driven by industry into the abyss. More than 90 percent of the world's large fishes have been wiped out over the last half-century as cutting-edge fishing technologies have reduced seas to wastelands.

Meanwhile, politicians continue to subsidize the fishing industry and issue regulations meant to fool the public into believing they're protecting the oceans. But the rules themselves are riddled with loopholes - and fishermen ignore them, anyway.

Charles Clover made this case about overfishing on a global scale in his recent book, *The End of the Line*. And Franklin brings it home to the [Chesapeake Bay](#) in *The Most Important Fish In the Sea: Menhaden and America*. Billions of menhaden once migrated up and down the Atlantic coast, from Maine to Florida, like a living river. They were the fish that the Native Americans taught the Pilgrims to catch, to use as fertilizer as they planted maize. During the late 19th century, menhaden rendering plants popped up all along the Atlantic coast, churning out fertilizer and fish oil that replaced sperm whale oil as an industrial lubricant.

The fish - also known as bunkers, alewives and by more than two dozen other names - reproduced fast enough to survive these historic assaults. But in recent decades, their numbers have fallen and their range has shrunk, and they haven't been seen north of Cape Cod since 1993.

Driving the overfishing today is a company called Omega Protein, which operates the largest fishery in the U.S. out of the tiny southern [Chesapeake Bay](#) town of Reedville, Va., Franklin writes.

Omega uses a high-tech fleet of 61 ships and 32 spotter planes to catch billions of menhaden every year for boiling down in a variety of commercial products, from chicken and pet food to Omega 3 fatty acid dietary supplement pills.

The company has a virtual monopoly on the menhaden trade. Its airplanes spot schools of menhaden, and then its smaller boats encircle the fish with huge nets called purse seines, which tighten into bags like purses.

The ships then cruise up next to the purses, and vacuum up tons of the trapped fish through huge hoses.

As populations of menhaden have crashed, conservationists and sports fishermen have raised an outcry, because bluefish and rockfish also suffer when their main source of food vanishes. The environmental group Greenpeace held demonstrations, raising a banner on boats floating outside Omega's Reedville plant declaring: "Omega: Factory Fishing is Overkill."

The landmark announcement made last July by the Maryland and Virginia leaders was welcomed by many mainstream environmentalists, but it was highly misleading, Franklin writes. The so-called "limit" did not make the politically influential Omega company limit its business in any way.

The "cap" of 109,020 tons of menhaden a year is the average of what Omega has been catching over the past five years. This means they can keep doing exactly what they've been doing to imperil the most important fish in the sea. Moreover, the compromise plan hammered out between Virginia and Omega allows the company to catch up to 122,740 tons of fish - an increase from the current average - in any year if it suffers any dips in the previous year.

A better solution, Franklin argues, would be a total moratorium on menhaden fishing. New Jersey passed a law banning Omega's fleets from its waters in 2001. And within three years there was a "stunning

resurgence" not only of menhaden off the Jersey Shore, but of bluefish and striped bass. Maryland and Virginia should follow New Jersey's lead, Franklin writes, and enjoy a similar resurgence.

"In the fall of 2005, an armada of healthy stripers on their southern migration from New England swept into the bays along the shore [of New Jersey], while hordes of bluefish stayed around until almost the end of November, several weeks longer than usual," Franklin writes. "Many of us had seen nothing like it. Maybe it wasn't proof, but that fall certainly seemed convincing evidence that the experiment was succeeding - so far."