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## Tracing the Demise of Salmon

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# Tracing the demise of salmon



Fishing is not Lissa Wadewitz's passion, nor her hobby. She's not worked on a commercial fishing boat, or even gone sport fishing, save for an occasional trout fishing excursion in a Northwest lake as a child.

Yet she brings to life the drama, politics and greed that were factors in the demise of Pacific salmon over the last century in her new book, *The Nature of Borders: Salmon, Boundaries and Bandits in the Salish Sea*.

Scheduled for publication by the University of Washington Press next spring, the book explores how the border between British Columbia and Washington state led to the decline of the salmon runs – from fish so abundant they filled the region's rivers from bank to bank to today's status as an endangered species. The book has also been accepted into the prestigious Emil and Kathleen Sick Series, which specializes in publications about the U.S. West and will be co-published in Canada by the UBC Press.

As an environmental historian and assistant professor of history at Linfield, Wadewitz was intrigued by the project because it was about an environmental issue that transcended international boundaries.

Animals, air and water – all resources unhindered by boundaries – create difficult environmental policy problems, Wadewitz said. "It's impossible to know where the salmon will run between British Columbia and Washington state," Wadewitz said. "While the salmon have general cycles and places where they congregate, those areas could be just north or just south of the 49th parallel.

"I wondered how the creation of the international border between Canada and the U.S. affected how the

fishery was managed and how fisherman fished – because Americans couldn't legally go north of the 49th parallel and Canadians couldn't come south. The conflicts at the border and the politics surrounding them are missing from the story about this fishery's decline."

Her research unearthed rich stories of fish pirates and smugglers who raided cannery fish traps that they claimed were both wasteful and inefficient. Attempts to regulate salmon fishing by both the U.S. and Canadian authorities had little success in preventing overfishing or stopping poaching.

Wadewitz's book compares those stories with the Native American communities who for hundreds, if not thousands, of years followed very specific rules governing who owned fishing sites and who had access to them.

"It's an interesting contrast between the native system that worked very effectively to conserve the salmon runs, and the border system that came after which actually helped contribute to the decline," she said.

Between the 1890s and 1930s, the U.S. and Canada first attempted to pass joint salmon fishery management policies and then an international treaty to regulate salmon conservation. However, the conditions created by the international border fostered mistrust and suspicions and, as a result, the U.S. and Canada were unable to move past this impasse until 1937.

The issues she identifies aren't limited to salmon and the Salish Sea, but can be compared to nations that are attempting to manage the entire Pacific Ocean today. Instead of claiming three miles out from individual coasts as exclusive fishing grounds, countries now claim those borders extend 200 miles. Some international agreements are attempts to regulate fishing on the high seas.

"Treaties in the North Pacific between Japan, Korea,



Russia, Canada and the U.S. attempt to monitor the entire North Pacific and are essentially drawing new types of borders around a resource that is mobile,” she said. “It didn’t work before and it’s not working now.”

Wadewitz’s work on this project contributed to her selection as the Kelley Faculty Scholar at Linfield. The award recognizes outstanding faculty achievement and provides support to assist a faculty member in pursuing additional projects. She plans to begin research on the interactions and negotiations that occurred between fishermen of diverse origins on the high seas or at Pacific Ocean way stations in the 19th and 20th centuries.

## Re-thinking assumptions

Wadewitz is soft-spoken and quick to laugh, with long auburn hair swishing around her face, which she quickly ties back. Although a lover of history because “I do think we can learn from the past,” she majored in Asian studies and Japanese language and spent two years teaching English in Japan after graduation. It was there she had an epiphany: she knew more Japanese history than American history.

“People in the other countries I visited were curious about why the U.S. was doing this or that and it brought home to me how little U.S. history I knew,” she said. She returned with a renewed interest in American history and began work on her Ph.D.

Wadewitz is called an energetic, compassionate and flexible teacher and works to inspire students to grapple

with difficult historical questions. Instead of lecturing to students, she engages them through thought-provoking discussion and classroom activities, said Dulce Kersting ’11, a graduate student at Washington State University, who was an advisee, a teaching aide in Wadewitz’s class, and a peer advisor for Colloquium.

“She has a way of making students across a variety of disciplines feel comfortable and confident as they form their own opinions about events and individuals that have shaped the world we live in today,” Kersting said. “Most importantly, she encourages students to have an opinion instead of handing down a historical verdict from above.”

Wadewitz admits she loves it when she can “blow her students’ minds” and force them to re-think the assumptions they have made about the past.

“Most students only know a little bit of American history and often what I teach in my classes doesn’t match what they learned in high school,” she said. “I love those moments because that’s when they get interested.”

In one class, when Wadewitz was covering how attempts by the U.S. Army to confine Indians on reservations resulted in a number of Indian massacres, one student raised his hand and said, “Why are we only learning about this now?”

“I threw the question back to them and we had a productive, thoughtful discussion about something they had never heard about, or thought of, before,” she said. “After a discussion like that, I leave at the end of the day and know I did something right.”

Describing herself as a bit of a “nudger,” Wadewitz wants students to think about the meaning of the images or documents they discuss in class.

“I don’t like to just tell them, ‘this is what happened and this is why it’s important,’ I try to get them to figure it out for themselves.”

– Mardi Mileham

## The Wadewitz file

At Linfield since 2007

Education:

B.A., Asian Studies, Pomona College

M.A., Ph.D., history, UCLA

Academic Interests:

U.S. environmental history (*and related topics*), history

of the U.S. West, Native American history,

U.S. women’s history