

Susana V. García (ed.), *En el mar Austral. La historia natural y la explotación de la fauna marina en el Atlántico Sur*, Rosario: Prohistoria, 2021, 218 pp., ISBN: 9789878090085

En el mar austral. La historia natural y la explotación de la fauna marina en el Atlántico Sur. With this suggestive title emerged the tenth volume of the collection “Historia de la Ciencia”, published by Prohistoria Ediciones (Rosario, Argentina). This is the first volume in that book series that is devoted entirely to the sea – at last. Susana V. García, both editor and author, accompanied by a cast of erudite contributors, guides us through original proposals that invite us to rethink mental and physical maps, and established ideas.

The whole book is an historiographical challenge. Regardless of the reader’s background, the predominant storyline is conceived of from a Western – preferably from the Northern hemisphere – perspective, with its feet planted on solid ground. Throughout the pages, readers circle the globe, blurring centres and establishing networks that determined how trade, politics and nature were intertwined beneath the waves in the middle of the nineteenth century.

Setting the ocean as basecamp, each chapter is an exercise in revisiting, understanding and explaining the hustle and bustle of natural history practice. Shipping routes were conditioned, if not determined, by extractive and commercial interests. Transatlantic voyages compounded a myriad of interests on a single ship. In this convergence and its conflicts, its exchanges and trade, on board and in the ports, knowledge and exploitation of Southern nature were shaped and spread almost inseparably.

Boundaries, geographical or political, lose any meaning they may have had on land once the ship sets sail. The sea is the seafarers’ homeland. Distances take on another dimension and priorities change. Living, or surviving, on board, means being permanently expectant of the immediate future, the upcoming storm, the next provisioning opportunity. To the swaying rhythm of the ship, sometimes planned, sometimes pioneering, the extractive activities were developed to supply distant cities avid for resources, as well as their inhabitants, who were eager to possess some of those rare, exotic, distant lifeforms and artefacts. This initially European demand also took root in the growing cosmopolitan communities along the Southern cone, which were essential to ensure the success of the voyage and its commercial mission – to which any other activity was subordinate.

The book weaves together the history of navigation with that of natural history. Starting with Podgorny’s chapter considering the little-studied yet indispensable relationship between the classification of marine fauna and its uses and ending with a chapter in which we change expeditions on the high seas for those undertaken within walls of a museum. Following testimonies to reconstruct this forgotten past, García traces the links between cetacean collections, strandings and the development of knowledge and industry related to whaling in Argentina.

In the continuum between those points, each chapter is a proposal for a journey focused on a practice, animal or place. Buenos Aires, Montevideo, Las Malvinas, Isla Esperanza, South Georgia: coasts and waters where activities were developed and new settlements grew around a parade of ships and their crews, as quickly as they fell into oblivion only a few decades later. Activity hot spots moving to the margins of the nautical charts they starred, once the routes were modified: gradually

preferring to cross the American continent through the Panama Channel opened in 1904. Many of the material extraction practices became less efficient or alternative products replaced the southern ones, such as electricity taking on oil. However, especially during the 19th century, those economic activities generated knowledge on and from the sea in little-known areas, while serving as resources to grease the economic gears that turned in the antipodes: Northern Europe, mainly.

Many of these extractive practices were shaped in response to circumstances as the coastline and its possibilities were explored and mapped. Few times can we talk of exclusive dedication of whalers, lobstermen, traders, or guano merchants. There were captains who undertook the voyage and often did it all at once, along the way, trying to make the expedition towards uncertainty a profitable one. Thus, the construction of knowledge about the natural history of remote coasts, their climate and inhabitants – animals, plants and humans – responds to exploration, but more often built upon the regime of visits and settlements of whalers, sealers and their multiple activities, as we see in García's second chapter on the French whalers. Chapter five offers us the history of the Dallmann expedition into Antarctic waters, signed by Lüdecke; while chapter six presents García and Reguero's study of Anton Larsen's expedition.

Some thoughts outline a thread through all the chapters. Necessarily, the development in the knowledge of the 'fat beasts' went hand in hand with the progress in the campaigns for their trade; an appropriation that raises doubts on their classification in the natural order. As we can see in the first chapter on these beasts, and also in the third chapter on guano, questions also arise about the ownership and regulation of these exploitations, the right of the first occupier of deserted islands, legislation, control, and the profitability of each exploitation. At the same time, there were growing concerns about limits. Resources were exploited, reducing availability, and extraction centres were moved to more profitable locations, with the consequent loss of population or entire colonies. This even led to the disappearance of species such as the case of the Malvinas' fox, explained in detail by Martínez in chapter four, while at the same time opening up questions: How was the management of other extinctions affected by the direct and participating observation. Did it generate conservationist concerns?

Studying the exploitation of Patagonian resources gives us a glimpse into different aspects of the past. Firstly, the political aspect: in spite of law efforts, the real control that could be exercised from the capitals on those remote lands was limited. Secondly, the social aspect: the impact on the people who inhabited the exploited coasts and were benefited or affected by it. Finally, the natural side that is especially embodied in this compilation of activities involving nature that serve to unravel how people understood, worked and built knowledge around it. These research lines are also useful in reconstructing populations' ecology leading to a greater understanding of its fluctuations over time, perhaps contributing to research focusing on our uncertain future.

Another undercurrent that runs through all texts is that of landscape modification. A recurring theme, central to chapters such as Haller's. Patagonian lands are commonly taken for pristine, but many places were populated and exploited. The extraction of penguin and cormorant guano often meant settlements of families, with their orchards and herds. This configured new landscapes now forgotten, in addition to the displacement and conflict with the indigenous population or the disappearance of bird colonies. Several questions arise in the reader's mind, for instance: how did the extraction of 73.485 tons of Patagonian guano – brought in by Great Britain – modify the coastline and what inhabits it?

Each of the authors offers us a new reading of coordinates that today emerge in the imagination as eternally inhospitable and distant. They recover histories, natures, and connections, indispensable to understand the developments in the north: from food and clothing, to the functioning of machines and lights or the fertilisation of crops. We could even add a new issue: guano used in explosives. Chapter after chapter, readers are challenged to rethink the world's configuration, opening up new paths of investigation from coasts once crucial and now relegated to the limits of globalisation. In sum, the work is a must-read to reframe history off land, from the South and from the Sea.

Aina Trias Verbeeck

IMF, CSIC

tribeeck@gmail.com