

An entertaining new memoir by Corky Decker "A Hard way to make an Easy Living" charts the rise and fall of an Alaskan fisherman with a gritty honesty about the work, the temptations and the perils of both being a young fisherman with access to large paychecks and a mature captain in the factory trawler fleet breaking the rules to meet the bottom line.

From walking the docks of Kodiak and getting his first shot at captaining a vessel to being blackballed from ever fishing in Alaska again, the rise is just as spectacular as the fall.

At once a personal narrative, the book is useful for understanding recent history of fishing in Alaska for the uninitiated, recounting the joint venture days of the 1980s and how this period shaped the ownership of assets across the state.

But the book is also about rules — and breaking them. It examines the fishery management practices in Alaska which are challenged in turns by Decker, who thinks there are better ways to fish. For instance, Decker says the International Pacific Halibut Commission has their heads in the sand, forcing bad fisheries management practices on other fisheries.

Decker was fired as captain from his 150-foot factory trawler, the Rebecca Irene, for ordering the pre-sorting of halibut, or throwing halibut overboard while a National Marine Fisheries Service observer wasn't looking, to avoid shutting down the fishery due to bycatch numbers. The owners of the trawler were ordered to pay \$360,000 in fines and the Rebecca Irene was suspended fishing permits worth \$2-3 million.

That's not giving the end of the book away. That's just about the first page.

Much of the book recounts Decker's fishing experience, which foreshadows how he comes to make his fateful decision. Almost from the beginning, fisheries management practices and outright waste in the industry rub him the wrong way.

In his early days fishing up and down the Northeast for bluefin tuna, Decker describes the first attempt to manage the resource. One tuna was instituted as the daily limit but additional tuna could be taken later in the season for every five that were tagged.

"We tagged everything that swam," Decker writes, "Including ocean sunfish, blue dogs (blue sharks), basking sharks, and pilot whales. If it swam to the surface, it was fair game. And of course we claimed them all as tagged bluefin."

His first experience fishing in Alaska, after walking the docks in Kodiak, was longlining for halibut. The vessel had little luck during the opener, catching only about 5,000 pounds of halibut.

"In those days we threw back at least 20,000 pounds of cod, dead or alive," Decker writes. "It was my introduction to a whole new way of thinking. The North Pacific way of

keeping only the good stuff seemed wrong. The attitude that there are a lot of fish, so who cares if you throw some overboard is something I've never been at peace with. Those fish add up to millions of pounds a year."

After meeting with Oral "Grandpa" Burch to whom the book is dedicated and working as a deck boss on the Dawn, Decker is given a shot at captaining the vessel after another captain quits. It was less than two years after landing in Alaska.

But the more time Decker spent fishing, the more waste he encountered.

"The boats at this time were roe stripping, taking only the roe from the pollock, which is very valuable, Decker writes. "I remember being offshore Bogoslof Island and seeing mile-size patches of pollock carcasses. The seabirds would turn the water surface into a living black mass. Seeing this further hardened me as I saw another wasteful practice being considered acceptable at the time."

Roe stripping was outlawed in the 1990s.

As captain of the Dawn, Decker participated in joint venture fishing, playing Russian, Japanese, and Korean motherships off each other.

"This was the period in my fishing career where my attitude changed and I became cocky." Decker writes "I could catch fish as well as anyone in my vessel class. I bent the rules as far as I could, trying to see where the limit was."

As the joint venture days drew to a close and Oral Burch passed away, Decker began fishing for other vessels, eventually leading to his involvement with the large factory trawlers.

Kodiak artist Bruce Nelson provided original art for the book, a relationship that was established when he worked as a crewmember for Decker.

There is a cautionary tale in the book of getting a crew together that included Nelson to go longlining for halibut. Mechanical breakdowns, and flooding plague the boat while sand flees and undersized halibut limit the catch. At the end of three weeks of difficult work, more money was spent on operating costs, bait and fuel than the money made by selling the halibut. The crew didn't make a dime.

Decker doesn't claim to be a religious person, but the experience of rebuilding his life after losing everything does offer new some spiritual insights at the end of "A hard way to make an easy living." Decker also writes passionately about what he considers to be bad laws and bad fisheries management practices that need to be set aright to help keep the tradition of commercial fishing alive for future generations.