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## A CURIOUS FINDING

From National Park Service Anthropology

*Lawrence F. Van Horn*

**A**s the first fulltime cultural anthropologist to be employed by the National Park Service (since 1978), I wish to report on some of my work at Voyageurs National Park, Minnesota, in 1979 and 1980.

NPS uses of anthropology encompass ethnography and ethnohistory, both for park planning and for interpretation. It was for the latter (the presentation to visitors of the natural, historical, and cultural events commemorated by a park) that I undertook an ethnography of the fishermen and an ethnohistory of commercial fishing in Voyageurs National Park in northern Minnesota on the Canadian border.

Commercial fishing, begun in the Rainy Lake region of the US and Canada around the turn of the century and reaching its heyday in the 1920s, survives today on the border lakes of Rainy and Namakan within the park, as well as in neighboring Ontario.

A curious fact I observed during fieldwork pertains to the use on the US side of a safety boat bar that looks like an inverted "U" when attached to the stern of an open, 16-foot outboard motorboat. The bar serves to prevent entanglement in the motor of the long, rectangular gill nets used for whitefish and walleyes. But on the Canadian side of the border there is a complete absence of the bar's use, even though the Canadian dories are often identical.

Allan Keilczewski, a Canadian fisherman on Lake Namakan, confirmed my observation that all American fishermen used the bar, but none of the Canadian fishermen did. The bar was designed and assembled first by an American, Harry Oveson, widely regarded as an extraordinary, professional fisherman and an accomplished amateur astronomer and naturalist. After World War II Oveson returned to fish in Minnesota inventing the bar that his fellow Minnesota fishermen quickly began to emulate.

The fact that the idea has not been adopted on the Canadian side must be viewed in the light of the excellent communication that exists between the two country's fishermen. They sell their catches in each other's countries, have engaged in regular cribbage games, and generally have maintained close contact.

Why, then, with such a useful, straightforward, easily adaptable device well known and proven, do the Canadian fishermen eschew the safety boat bar?

One Canadian has suggested that the non-use of the boat bar in Canada could be a rejection of an American idea just because it is American. According to Julie Byzewski, a reporter for the FORT FRANCES (Ontario) TIMES, with whom I have discussed my

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observations, this situation may illustrate what Canadians do not wish to be. They do not wish to be Americans or American copies.

The implication for applied anthropology is to ask what a custom means in terms of a group's social or ethnic identity. To the American fishermen, there may be more than a little pride in the fact that an effective piece of equipment was invented and spread locally that provides an extra margin of safety and convenience. To the Canadians, rejecting the bar by not outfitting themselves with it may have social meaning, too. It may be part of their identity to indicate who they are by not borrowing what they apparently perceive as another culture's custom, despite the boat bar's obvious utility.

It would be interesting to see, through further research, if the differential use of the boat bar is connected to any corresponding differences in social or cultural values, such as individualism or nationalism. In the meantime, American use of the safety boat bar among commercial fishermen in the Rainy Lake/Lake Namakan region of Minnesota and Ontario remains a little known but distinct cultural difference between the United States and Canada.

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## REVIEW

**EXTINCTION: The Cause and Consequence of Disappearance of the Species**, by Paul and Anne Ehrlich. New York: Random House, 1981. 305 pp. \$15.95.

"So what if a few more square miles of rainforest are chopped down? There's lots of rainforest left. So what if one more mountain in Colorado is dug up, ground to powder and stuffed into the local valley? There are other mountains, valleys. So what if another stretch of stream is rendered lifeless by solvents pouring from industrial plants?..." These questions and statements are examples of homocentric thinking tackled by Anne Ehrlich in *EXTINCTION*, a book collaborated with her husband, Paul. Homocentric thinking is a short-sighted view of ecological systems and their benefits, rendering natural resources useful only as economic ones. Homocentrism does not consider a world view; the past, present, future; nor does it consider humanitarian objectives. An example Anne cites is the Montana lumberman's motto: "The only good tree is a stump."

This type of thinking has been around a long time. But since the Industrial Revolution hundreds of species have been permanently lost due to habitat disruption...plant and animal species aren't being created as fast as they are disappearing. How many more years can ecosystems survive rapacious practices that stem from rapacious thinking? Paul and Anne, as well as other leading environmental scientists, estimate twenty-five.

Even though *EXTINCTION* is a collaboration of husband-wife's efforts, husband-wife's scientific experience, it is narrated by Anne and she has written it with respect for every living organism. Take, for example, mites. Who needs them? They