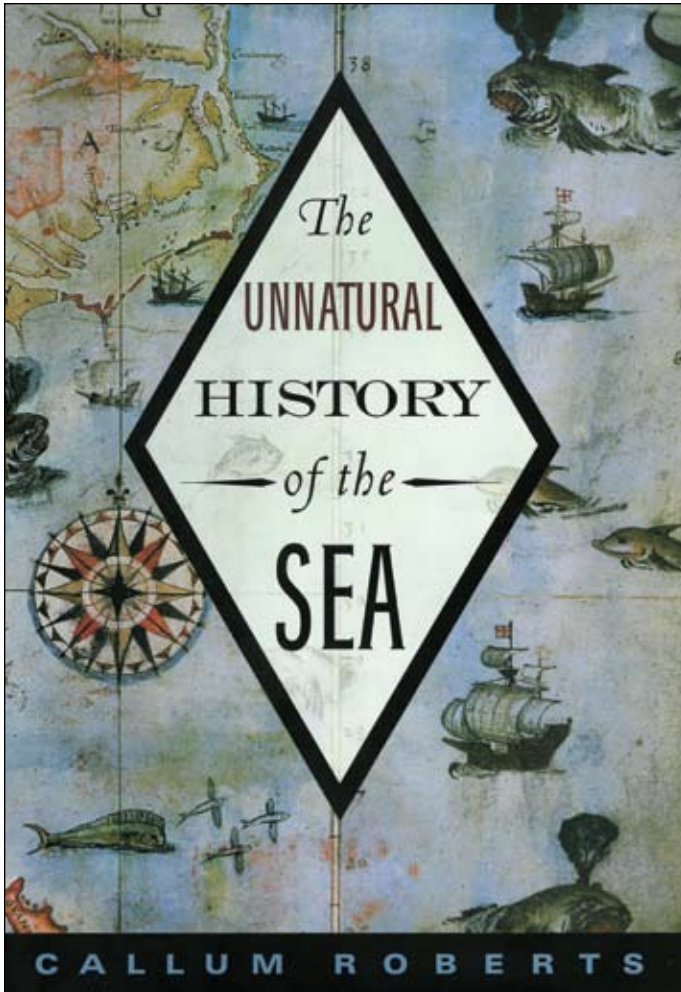


# REVIEWS

edited by MILBRY C. POLK



## THE UNNATURAL HISTORY OF THE SEA

by *Callum Roberts*

456 PP • WASHINGTON, D.C.: ISLAND PRESS, 2007 • ISBN-13: 978-1597261029 • \$28 • REVIEWED BY GAELIN ROSENWAKS

The ocean, once thought to be

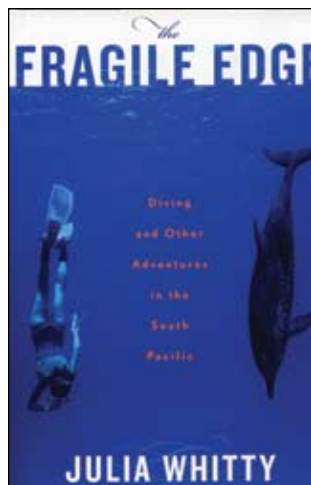
inexhaustible, has been subject to thousands of years of uninterrupted exploitation, but today scientists and fishermen have realized that the sea's bounty is

anything but boundless. In his book, *The Unnatural History of the Sea*, Callum Roberts, a renowned marine conservation biologist, outlines the systematic removal of commercially valuable species, from great whales to abalones. Roberts clearly and poignantly tells the tales of the historical removal of seemingly countless species in the context of technological improvements and increasing demand.

Roberts recounts the history of ocean exploration and its impact on the development of commercial ventures in the sea, from hunting seals and otters for pelts to gathering turtles to provision ships. He weaves a tale of unimaginable abundance followed by collapse of commercially viable enterprises in short time spans. With constant expansion and technological innovations like the steam engine, sonar, and refrigeration, previously inaccessible fisheries could be exploited. This growth had a profound impact on ocean ecosystems and their ability to recover from the onslaught of harvest. With the depletion of coastal fisheries, fishermen targeted species in the high seas and the deep sea. The invention of the deep-sea bottom trawl allowed for fisheries and destruction in the deep sea, one of the last great frontiers on Earth. Throughout the book, Roberts defines and explains

different methods of fishing as well as important concepts of fisheries management, allowing the reader to get a clear understanding of why we are seeing such devastation in the oceans today. It is not just overharvest but also habitat destruction and disruption in ecosystem function.

This is the book that gives readers a comprehensive and clear picture of what has happened and is happening in the oceans. These changes started a long time ago, but Roberts ends optimistically with a carefully laid out plan to ensure that we have prolific seas in the future.



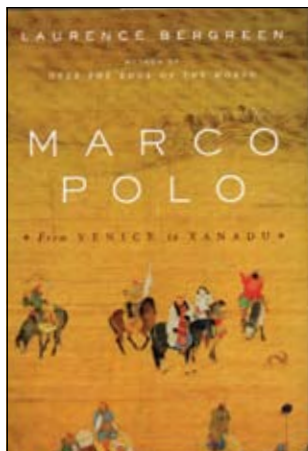
**THE FRAGILE EDGE**

by Julia Whitty

304 PP • NEW YORK: HOUGHTON MIFFLIN, 2007 • ISBN-10: 0618197168, ISBN-13: 978-0618197163 • \$25

*The Fragile Edge: Diving and Other Adventures in the South Pacific* weaves together a vibrant tapestry of adventure, science, and

personal reflection on life on the coral reef and islands of Rangiroa and Mo'orea in French Polynesia, and Funafuti in Tuvalu. Diver and documentary filmmaker Julia Whitty takes the reader into the luminous waters, describing the variety of fish and their activities. Throughout the narrative, she interjects bits of natural, human, and geological history and introduces to the local people with whom she dives and lives. She also shares with us *pranayama*, a breathing technique she uses to calm herself and connect with underwater life. Whitty's ruminations on the future of our oceans is sobering as overfishing and climate change threaten these islands in paradise.



**MARCO POLO**

by Laurence Bergreen

415 PP • NEW YORK: ALFRED A. KNOPF, 2007 • ISBN-10: 978-1-4000-4345-3 • \$28.95 • REVIEWED BY JEFF STOLZER

Marco Polo is a legendary figure in the history of exploration,

but the true story of his incredible odyssey across Asia has long been shrouded in spurious mythology.

Laurence Bergreen's superb new biography of Polo sets the record straight, painting a sharp and vivid portrait of the man, his times, the people he encountered, and the places that he visited.

Contrary to legend, Marco Polo was not the first European to travel to China. In fact, his father, Niccolo, and uncle, Maffeo, spent 16 years crisscrossing the Mongol Empire on an extended trading trip before Polo joined them in 1271 for a second journey to the court of Kublai Khan. Polo became a tax assessor and close advisor to Khan, traveling throughout the Mongol Empire and beyond for the next 17 years. These experiences—and the notes Polo kept about them—formed the basis of *Travels*, the memoir he wrote years later while languishing in a Genoese prison.

Bergreen's biography is full of wonderful details and he does a masterful job evoking the way life was lived in Italy and across Asia in the thirteenth century. He explains how Polo shattered the myth of the Mongols as Satan's spawns, instead depicting them as surprisingly tolerant, worldly, and curious about other cultures and religions. Marco Polo's remarkable life and legacy are fully captured in this wonderful, engrossing work.