

from Oops! Environmental Poetics by James Sherry

The Census of the Fishes

Mr. A.

decided to count all the fish in the sea,

because he wanted to....

He went to the New England Fishermen's Association and said,

"I am going to perform a census of the fishes."

"Don't do that," said the Fishers, "the government will regulate what we catch. We won't be able to catch the fish that we catch today."

Mr. A. decided that he would find a more friendly reception among environmental groups. "Can you imagine," said Mr. A. to the Environmentalists, "that in 1992 we still do not know the number and composition of marine life? Wouldn't you like to know about

millions of fish,

billions of crustaceans,

trillions of krill,

and a quintillion of copepods?"

"No, we would not," said the Environmentalists. "As soon as you identify the populations, the Fishers will exploit them."

Mr. A. decided that there must be a premium on ignorance, so he went to the Cold War Scientists who were out of work, because the submarines no longer flowed from Murmansk. He said, "You have been counting submarines for 50 years, how would you like to count fishes?"

"We are concerned with opacity," they said. "We can treat each fish like a submarine with a distinctive shape and acoustic signature. With the end of the Cold War, technologies developed for looking for submarines are now available for other purposes, and at a reduced cost. We can attach a line behind a boat. It will trail the boat in a sine wave counting all the submarines, er, fishes you wish. We can count the shallow and deep all over the world.

"For years we have been writing algorithms to push the fish into the background and bring out the submarines. Now we can push the submarines in the background and bring out the fish."

Mr. A. felt relieved and reassured.

Note: the census of marine life is nearly complete as of 2013