

What a woman!

With fishing at sea traditionally a male occupation, abandoning the straitjacketing of gender roles, today some of the ‘watermen’ of Chesapeake Bay in Maryland are women

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In Chesapeake Bay, located in Maryland in the United States, fishing continues to be an important occupation, with families carrying on the tradition for generations on end. The profession of ‘watermen’ is a venerated one, and the exploits of the region’s watermen legendary.

But among these watermen there are also a few women. This is a relatively recent development. Although women have long been involved in the business of fishing, their role has largely been seen as supportive and land-based.

Wives would get up at 3 or 4 in the morning to fix their husbands’ breakfasts, and would meet them in the evenings at the dock to help clean up and prep for the next day. Some adventurous women also manned the crab-picking houses, and others before that beacons the great lighthouses along the bay.

It was only in the post-World War II period that women began to go out to sea independently to fish. In 1982, women held 13 of 2320 commercial fishing licences in the state—today, they hold 566 out of the 6758 licences.

Being a traditionally male occupation, few men pass on the trade to their daughters. Crystal Jordan is one of the rare examples: for years, she and her father followed the crabs, moving up and down the bay together, on weekends and all summer, from April through December.

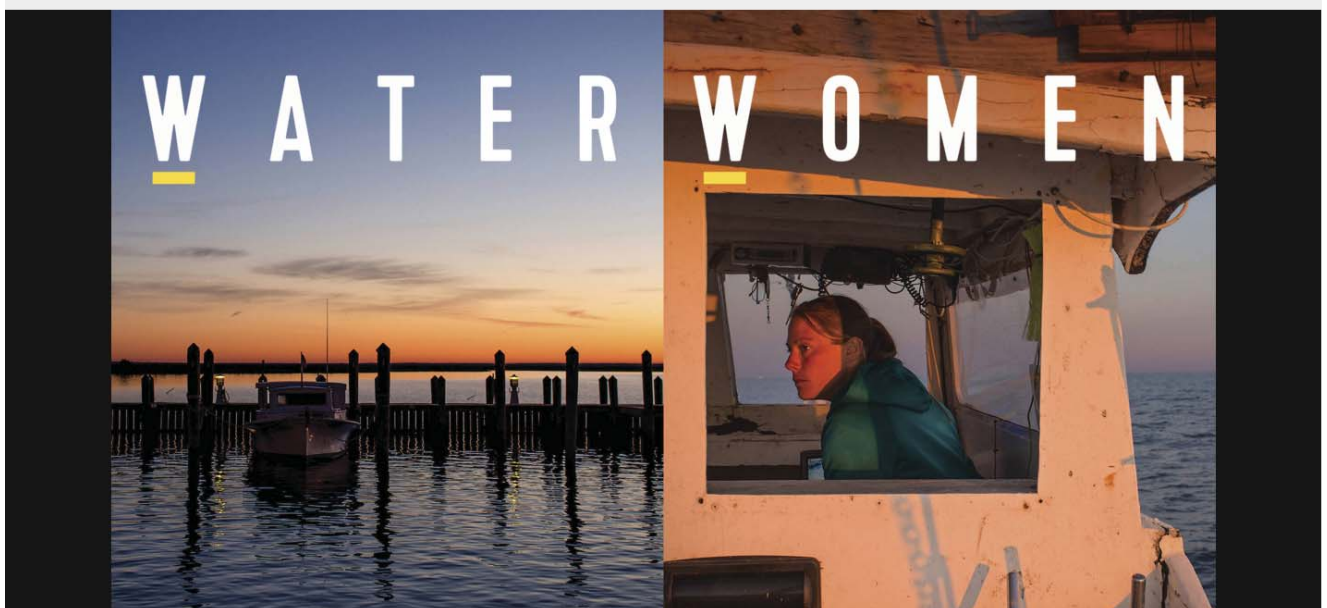
When her father was diagnosed with brain cancer, he took efforts to ensure that the necessary skills and knowledge were passed on. Once he died, Crystal began to go out to sea alone.

The occupation of watermen is one where outsiders are shunned. But, with the advent of aquaculture, which is not rigidly bound by tradition, more women have entered the profession. One such is Jill Buck, who has been fishing independently for six years now.

It was not easy at first—mistakes, like docking the boat too hard or filling the cages too high, were common. But by now the necessary confidence and skills have been acquired. Her husband, who currently works in a power plant, plans to join her on the boat next year.

Fewer young people are following in their parents’ footsteps. Commercial licences are limited and equipment is very expensive. There’s less to catch and more regulations. Nonetheless, a few more women are just starting out, and others are continuing the work of a lifetime.


Like Lois Lednum, who married Dickie, a waterman, when they were both just 18. Initially, she stayed home, taking care of the



house and their four sons. But once the boys were grown, she woke with him before dawn and took to the water with him.

Wet, muddy and dirty as the work is, it comes with a massive compensation in terms of closeness to nature, and Lois continues to go to sea with her husband even at the age of 75.

This article is a summary based on an article by Lydia Woolever, on A handful of heroines work the Chesapeake Bay, that appeared first in Baltimore Magazine

(<http://www.baltimoremagazine.net/2016/7/11/waterwomen-a-handful-of-heroines-work-the-chesapeake-bay>). 

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