

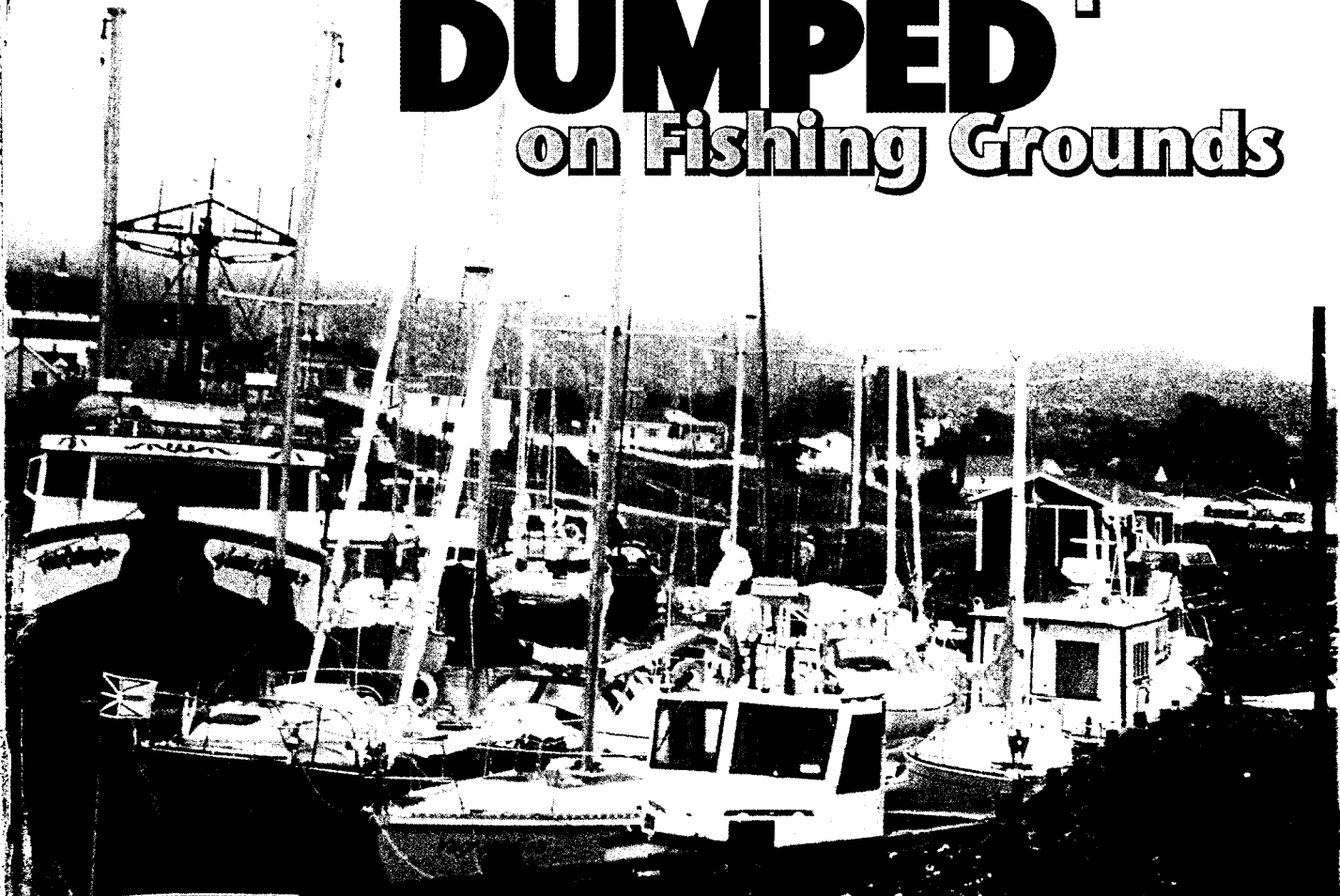
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The Navigator

THE VOICE OF THE FISHING INDUSTRY

Chemical Weapons **DUMPED** on Fishing Grounds



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Are Fishing Families about to Disappear?

An essay

*"Fishin' is not a job, not everyone can do this as a way of life."
 "The fishery now a day is all about who you are, not what you are."
 - comments made by fishermen from Guysborough County, Nova Scotia*

The place of family and community is still at the social heart of the small boat fisheries in Nova Scotia, according to a study by Social Research for Sustainable Fisheries (SRSF). But, how long it will stay that way is a good question.

Many changes are occurring that challenge the importance of family and community, and suggest a future for the small boat fisheries that might be very different than type of fisheries that exists today. SRSF research with Northeastern Nova Scotia fish harvesters from the Gulf (Pictou to Mabou) and Atlantic Coast (St.

Peter's Channel to Liscomb) regions indicates that the vast majority in both areas share feelings of deep attachment to the fishing way of life. Over 80% of the lobster license holders interviewed in both regions responded 'probably' or 'definitely' when asked if they would re-enter fishing should they have their life to live over. This sense of attachment is deeply rooted in family and kin relations. Half of those interviewed in the Chedabucto Bay region report having seven or more kin who fish or had fished for a living. 56% of those in the St. Georges Bay region

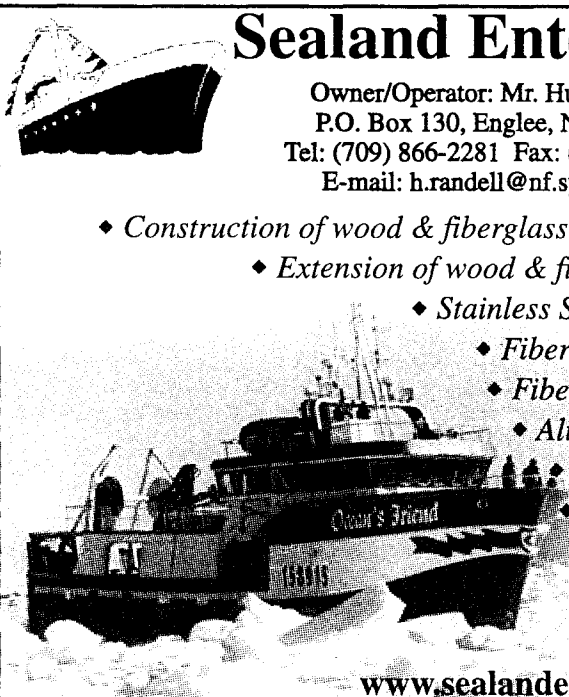
report having four or more immediate relatives fishing for a living.

It is through their family and community networks that most of today's fishermen got their start in fishing. About 50% of those interviewed in both regions report that they began fishing with their fathers and a further 20% report beginning with other kin such as grandfathers, uncles and brothers. Many others report that they began fishing with a 'family friend' (8% for Chedabucto Bay and 18% for St. Georges Bay). Recruiting sons, daughters, wives and other close relatives into the fishery makes good sense from an economic standpoint since it consolidates all fisheries-related income, including unemployment benefits, within the household or extended family. It is also the case that recruitment of this type results in the passing on of the local 'fishing culture' to a new generation. Family and kin networks provide the means by which individuals acquire the social values, work habits, and attitudes that define small boat fishing as a distinct and rewarding way of life.

The changing social fabric of small boat fisheries

SRSF research indicates, however, that a dramatic change is now occurring in local recruitment patterns. Around 25% of those interviewed report that one or more of their sons fish. In fact, fishermen in the Chedabucto Bay region report more wives fishing (36%) than sons (28%). Although the trend is less strong on the St. Georges Bay side, there are also more wives (14%) and fewer sons (26%) fishing today than in the past. Only a small number report having daughters that fish.

Changes made in the late 1970s to unemployment insurance regulations may have initiated this



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trend. Now, it has become part of a deliberate strategy for keeping children out of fishing. As one fisherman stated bluntly, "I'm trying to discourage my son from going into fishing." Several others reported that they don't let their children even step aboard their boats, in order to assure they don't get "...bitten by the bug of fishin". Finally, the research shows that the younger the captain, the greater the likelihood his wife, rather than his children, fish as crew.

Implications and future possibilities

The federal fisheries management system must shoulder some responsibility for the fact that family and kin relations are becoming increasingly irrelevant to the small boat fisheries. For over 30 years, fisheries managers have sought to reduce fishing effort in the small boat sector. Today's limited entry licensing and quota allocation systems ignore the depth and richness of family, kin and community relations in relation to local fisheries resources. Fishing history is interpreted as average catches, rather than the extent to which fish harvesters are socially rooted in the fisheries. DFO policy, quite intentionally, has led to escalating prices for licenses and quota, most notably in the lobster, shrimp, and snow crab fisheries. For many fishermen who got in early, licenses and quotas worth hundreds of thousands of dollars now provide a retirement windfall. As one fisherman observed: "My licenses and boat are my retirement package and if I were to give them to my son or daughter than they would have to support me because I would not be able to survive on a government pension.

Recent entrants to the fisheries, on the other hand, have to borrow heavily to obtain

licenses and quota. Their high debt loads then force them to concentrate on immediate, short-term profit rather than long term social and ecological sustainability. This goes a long way towards explaining why the majority of fishermen, when asked if they would advise a child of theirs to enter the fishery, report that they would do so only on one condition — if the child was already in possession of at least one high value license and all the necessary gear.


Perhaps, professionalization processes will replace family and community in small boat fishing. It is highly uncertain, however, whether a professionalized fishery will be as sustainable as the old system. Professionalization may lead to the breakdown of informal management grounded in local practices, local knowledge and the traditions of fishing families and communities.

But, professionalization could provide harvesters with a more effective organizational 'voice' in policy development than is presently the case. It would also provide a measure of access for those persons who are keen to take up fishing, regardless of their place of origin. For better or worse, family, friendship, and place of residence are not widely accepted today as the basis for determining who should have access to public resources. The one exception to this is in circumstances where

treaty rights are acknowledged to exist, as in the case of the Mi'kmaq.

To what extent are these changes and their implications known to small boat fishing families and communities and to what extent are they an expression of the families' and communities' wills? Given the magnitude of these changes, small boat fishing families and communities might want to engage with these issues, with a view to achieving a stronger 'voice' and a claim to determinant 'rights' respecting the policy decisions that are reshaping their livelihoods and social world. †

This essay was prepared with contributions from: Anthony Davis, SRSF Director, John Wagner, SRSF Research Coordinator, Holli MacPherson, SRSF Project Officer and DFO Science Horizons Intern, SRSF Community Research Coordinators - Virginia Boudreau (the Guysborough County Inshore Fishermen's Association), Kerry Prosper, Paq'ntkek Fish and Wildlife Society, Kay Wallace (the Gulf Nova Scotia Bonafide Fishermen's Association), and Patricia Rhynold, Manager, the Guysborough County Inshore Fishermen's Association. SRSF is supported by a grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, Community-University Research Alliances (CURA) program.



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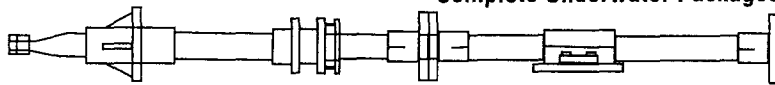
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