



Fishing Families and the Changing Social Fabric of Small Boat Fishing

“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

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The small boat fishery has been and remains the social and economic backbone of Nova Scotia’s coastal communities. Over thirty years of social research has documented the depth and social richness of the attachments that the vast majority of small boat fish harvesters feel about their livelihoods and communities (for example, Apostle et.al. 1985, Matthews 1976, and Theissen and Davis 1988). A basic ‘social fact’ resides at the heart of livelihood satisfaction and attachments to place. This social fact is that family and community are located centrally in the

organisation and pursuit of small boat fishing livelihoods. The results from some recent research completed by Social Research for Sustainable Fisheries (SRSF) reaffirms the place of family and community as the social heart of the small boat fisheries. Additionally, this research also reveals some important changes that are currently underway, changes that raise questions about the place of family and community within the small boat fisheries of the future.

Background into small boat fishing

Table 1 presents a social profile of the lobster license holders who participated in the SRSF study. This information shows that, while more or less the same in terms of overall experience (years fished), St. Georges Bay small boat fish harvesters are more likely to be older, to have more years of formal education, and to fish more weeks than are their counterparts fishing in and around the Chedabucto Bay region. Yet, differences aside, the vast majorities in both areas equally share feelings of deep attachment to the harbour from which they fish (‘belong’) and 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. These findings are consistent with those reported from earlier work

with Atlantic Coast small boat marine harvesters (Apostle et. al. 1985 and Thiessen and Davis 1988). Small boat fishing provides very high levels of satisfaction in areas such as participating in meaningful work, working outdoors, and independence (e.g., ‘being your own boss’). As might be expected, over ninety-eight percent of those interviewed also stated that they felt they either ‘belonged’ or ‘really belonged’ to the harbour from which they fished. Again, these results are notably consistent with those from earlier studies.

Table 1: General Personal Attributes and Attachments of Participating Lobster License Holders

<i>Categories</i>	<i>St. Georges Bay</i>	<i>Chedabucto Bay</i>
Median Age	51	49
Median Formal Education	11	9
Median Years Fished	25	25
Median Weeks Fished (Previous Year)	18	16
% Feeling That They Belong to Their Harbour	98.1	98.4
% Stating That They Would Re-enter Fishing if They Had Their Lives to Live Over	81.6	82.7

As might be expected, such commonly expressed feelings of belonging and attachment are rooted in the fact that, for most, small boat fishing is nested within families and among kin relations, through both descent and marriage. Table 2 presents information that shows the extent and concentration of family and kin relations. In general, those interviewed from within the Chedabucto Bay Region describe having a larger number of immediate family and kin relations who either fish or have fished than is the case among the St. Georges Bay lobster license holders. For example, almost one in every two of the former report having seven or more kin who fish or fished, as compared with almost one in every four among the St. Georges Bay license holders. Irrespective of the concentration differences, the vast majority of harvesters in both areas report that at least some members of their immediate family and kin either fish or have fished for their living. Here is evident the extent to which small boat fishing is socially embedded in and, in critical ways, expressive of immediate and kin-related family social relationships. These relationships constitute the essential social fabric of small boat fishing, so much so that it would be difficult to imagine the small boat fishery existing without them.

Table 2: The Concentration of Family Relations in Fishing by Region

<i>Concentration of Family Relations</i>	<i>Region</i>	
	<i>Chedabucto Bay</i>	<i>St. Georges Bay</i>
	(N=159)	(N=127)
	%	%
Low (0 to 3 Relations)	18.2	43.3
Medium (4 to 6 Relations)	32.1	37.8
High (7 to 9 Relations)	49.7	18.9

(Note: Out of a maximum of 12 family relations specified in the survey, the most that any respondent indicated was a total of 9.)

Of course, the fishing family and kin networks have been the primary site wherein new entrants have been recruited to the fisheries; that is, sons and, increasingly, daughters. This is evident in the results reported in Table 3. In and around one in every two of those interviewed from both regions reported that they began fishing with their fathers. As one Richmond County fish harvester put it, “I have three sons and they fished with me all through high school and university. Each morning I’d wake a different one up.” Around an additional 20% described starting their fishing livelihoods with other kin such as fathers’ fathers, brothers, fathers’ brothers, and mothers’ brothers. Additionally, when not starting with an immediate family member, many note that they began fishing with a ‘family friend’. Certainly friendship and familiarity are also important social attributes of the small boat fisheries.

For many, access to and participation in the fisheries have been rooted in family and kin relations, as well as family interests. After all, as a family-rooted livelihood, small boat captains and family members have an economic and social interest in consolidating and keeping fishing, and fishing-related income such as unemployment benefits, within the household. This supports and maintains the household as well as the fishing enterprise. Given these attributes, there is considerable economic sensibility in recruiting sons, daughters, and, lately, wives to crewing positions. Furthermore, these family-centred interests and processes also characterise the site wherein most in each new generation of fish harvesters have learned the fundamentals, from fathers and other kin, about how and where to fish

as well as how to handle and maintain the boat and gear. The family and kin are also a primary site wherein learning occurs about how to be a ‘fisherman’. Family and kin are primary to learning key qualities that ‘make’ any new recruit a fish harvester such as fishing-associated social values, work habits, and attitudes respecting physically challenging labour. That is, family and kin are centrally placed in the local ‘fishing culture’, definitive to understanding and practising fishing as a ‘way of life’. In these ways, fishing families, for most, have assured a level of recruitment sufficient to sustain small boat fishing.

Table 3: Percentage of Persons First Fished With by Social Relationship and Region

<i>Social Relation</i>	<i>Region</i>	
	<i>Chedabucto Bay</i> (N=159) %	<i>St. Georges Bay</i> (N=127) %
Fathers	53.5	49.6
Fathers’ Fathers	1.9	0.0
Fathers’ Brothers	2.5	2.4
Mothers’ Fathers	1.3	0.8
Mothers’ Brothers	1.3	3.1
Brothers	5.0	7.1
Other Kin Relations	5.7	6.3
Family Friend	6.9	18.1
Other	22.0	12.6

(Note: In the ‘other’ category, the most frequent situation mentioned was that the participants began fishing by themselves)

For most fishing families, fishing for a living has been multigenerational. This is fully evident in the information presented in Table 4. Almost all of the lobster license holders report having some immediate family and kin relations fishing. For many in both regions these are persons related through the male line, meaning fathers, brothers, fathers’ fathers, and fathers’ brothers. The most highly concentrated family connections are found in the Chedabucto Bay region. Here family connections commonly reach through the female as well as the male lines. That is, many more in

the Chedabucto Bay region than in the St. Georges Bay area report that kin such as their mothers' fathers, mothers' brothers, wives, and wives' fathers fish or fished for their living. These differences are likely associated with the fact that few livelihood options to fishing have been available within the Chedabucto Bay region, while livelihood alternatives such as trades and farming have been much more accessible for people living in the St. Georges Bay area.

Table 4: Percentage of Selected Family Relations Who Fish or Fished For Their Livelihood by Region

<i>Family Relation</i>	<i>Region</i>	
	Chedabucto Bay (N=159) %	St. Georges Bay (N= 127) %
Fathers	84.9	76.4
Fathers' Fathers	77.8	53.5
Fathers' Brothers	66.9	48.8
Brothers	51.0	59.8
Sisters	7.7	0.8
Sisters' Husbands	20.8	0.0
Wives	35.9	14.2
Sons	28.0	26.0
Daughters	7.2	3.9
Mothers' Fathers	57.3	33.1
Mothers' Brothers	66.9	39.4
Wives' Fathers	54.1	11.8

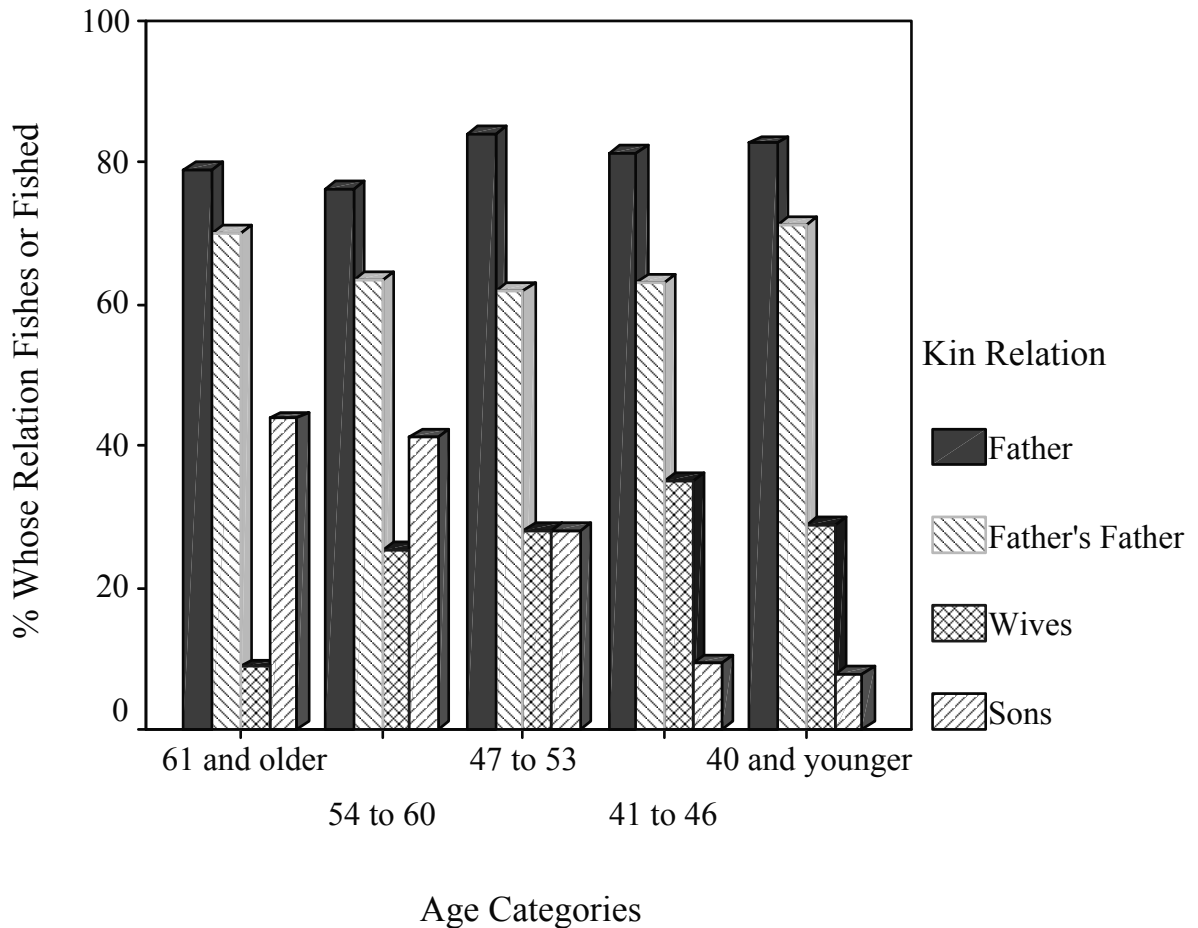
Notably, a similar proportion in both regions, just over one in every four, reported that their sons fish or fished. Well under 1 in 10 reported having daughters that fish or fished. These results seem surprisingly low, given that continuation of the family tradition in small boat fishing is dependent entirely on recruitment and retention of sons and, perhaps increasingly, daughters to the fisheries.

Furthermore, these results also show that over one in every three Chedabucto Bay region and over one in ten St. Georges Bay area fish harvesters have wives who fish or fished. Such high levels of participation suggest that, for some at least, crewing positions customarily filled by sons are now occupied by wives.

Changes to Unemployment Insurance regulations in the late 1970s made it economically attractive for fishing captains and fishing families to engage wives as crew. This helps concentrate fishing earnings within the household and also increases household access to unemployment benefits, both important to sustaining the family and the fishing enterprise. But, some sons and daughters interested in taking up fishing may be discouraged and dissuaded from doing so by the simple fact that their mothers occupy crewing positions. Additionally, some fathers and mothers may also be employing this as a means to discourage their children from entering. As one Guysborough County fisher insisted, “I’m trying to discourage my son from going into fishing,” a sentiment that was frequently heard by the interviewers. Several harvesters reported that they prohibit their children from even stepping aboard their boats and try to do everything they can to assure that their children do not get drawn into the fishing livelihood by getting “...bitten by the bug of fishin’.”

These trends are further evident in the information presented in Figure 1 which presents, for participants’ age categories, major kin categories identified as either currently fishing or having fished in the past. Irrespective of age, the vast majority of all fishing captains interviewed have fathers and fathers’ fathers who fish or fished. The same cannot be said for the trends associated with sons and wives. Over two in every five captains 54 years of age and older report sons who either fish or fished, while less than one in every ten of those captains 46 years of age and younger note having sons who are or were involved in fishing. This is quite a contrast, one that shows a considerable decline among the youngest captains in the involvement of sons with fishing. An opposite trend is evident with respect to wives. That is, the younger captains are much more likely to have wives who fish or fished than is the case among the older captains. The trends evident here, especially as associated with the younger captains, confirm the suspicion that wives are occupying crewing positions that were once filled by sons and, occasionally, daughters. This evidence suggests that major changes in small boat fisheries’ social organisation and familial recruitment dynamics are underway.

Figure 1: % of Kin Who Fish or Fished by Age Category



(Note: While it might be thought that the youngest captains do not have many sons of an age to go fishing, this likely is not the case for harvesters between 41 and 53 years of age. A notable reduction in sons' participation is evident among captains within these age categories. Wives' participation increases across these age categories at the same time and almost on a scale that mirrors the reduction in sons' participation. This suggests an inverse association between wives' and sons' participation, an association indicating that some meaningful changes in the small boat fisheries' social fabric are underway.)

Conclusions and Implications

The evidence presented here shows the depth and richness of family and kinship relations within the small boat fisheries. Arguably, the social fabric and foundations of most coastal communities are composed and defined by these relations, and the implication that life and work are nested within relationships characterised by family and familiars. These qualities are expressed through most aspects of small boat fishing livelihoods, ranging from recruitment of new participants, through the training or ‘making’ of the next generation of fish harvesters, to the social relations that organise how grounds are fished. But, the most recent generation of fish harvesters is participating in a notably altered social context.

Without doubt the trends described here raise very important questions concerning the ways participants are being recruited to the small boat fisheries. Even more importantly, a continuation of these trends through the near future will likely compromise, perhaps even terminate, the central place of family and kin relations in the small boat fisheries’ social organisation and dynamics. Certainly, the social fabric of the small boat fisheries is undergoing change. There are many explanations for this. Among these are the impacts of government fisheries management policies, the groundfish moratorium and related economic uncertainties, and the relatively low social status that continues to be associated with earning a living through physical work in natural environments. But, perhaps a core explanation is found in the view of one Guysborough County small boat harvester who insisted: “The fishery now a day is all about who you are not what you are.” In this view, being ‘made’ a fisherman is no longer sufficient for participation and success. The current climate privileges those with connections and access to financial backing, especially when it comes to purchasing boats, equipment, and, most importantly, government regulated licenses and/or quotas.

The character and development of the federal fisheries management system has been central to these processes. For over 30 years now the fisheries management system has targeted the reduction of fishing effort in the small boat sector as essential to achieving economic viability, meaning a reduction in the numbers of boats and fish harvesters and a consolidation of those remaining into a smaller number of small craft harbours. Among the main instruments employed to achieve these goals are limited entry licensing, quota allocations, reductions in and elimination of vessel and equipment purchase subsidies, and devolution of small craft harbour management and economic maintenance responsibilities to local harbour authorities.

Today’s limited entry licensing and quota allocation systems, acknowledge federal (‘Crown’) ownership of marine resources and authority respecting the granting of access. The license and quota systems are designed to allocate and to regulate ‘privileges’ distributed, by the grace of the government, under the authority of the Minister of Fisheries and Oceans. The depth

and richness of family, kin and community relations with and dependence upon fisheries resources only have meaning in allocation decisions in so far as ‘history’ *may* be taken into account. But, in this context history is usually interpreted to mean the recent fishing history of specific harvesters rather than the overall time depth of family, kin and community participation in and livelihood dependence on the fisheries. Indeed, a multi-generational family and community history in fishing, rather than bestowing any notion of primacy in or ‘right’ to fish, either is ignored or treated as a liability, one of the barriers to modernising the fisheries.

For instance, even a very limited consideration of history actually contradicts the original intention of licensing and quota systems. The intention of these systems is to impose ‘market type conditions’ and business enterprise logic in order to achieve the so-called benefits of economically rational organisation and operation, benefits such as greater returns on investment and lower costs per unit of fishing effort. Indeed, holders of what have become high value licenses and quota, for example, lobster and snow crab, now realise considerable economic benefits from this system. The primary benefit, other than access to the resource, is in the market value of the licenses and quotas. For many of those that got in early, licenses and quotas worth hundreds of thousands of dollars provide a retirement windfall. As one fish harvester 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.”

Most recent entrants face a different economic situation. Many have had to borrow heavily in order to obtain the high value licenses and/or quotas necessary to sustain a small boat fishing livelihood. They must fish in order to service this debt as well as to satisfy livelihood requirements. Certainly the realities of taking on and servicing such debt brings an entirely new approach to fishing, one that compels harvesters increasingly to organise and operate on a business model. Here the fishing enterprise’s economic performance and efficiencies take centre stage. These attributes explain, to some extent, why the majority of harvesters, when asked if they would advise a child of theirs to enter the fishery, declare they would only if the child could enter already in possession of at least one high value license and all of the necessary gear. In such circumstances, family relationships, dislocation of family and community, destruction of livelihoods, and dismantling the small boat fisheries’ social fabric are of little or no concern.

Arguably, these outcomes have been intentional since they are essential to achieving the stated fisheries management goals of reducing the numbers of boats and fish harvesters. Dramatically increased fees for mandated requirements (e.g., licenses and dockside monitors), as well as the devolution of financial and management responsibilities for small craft harbours to local harbour authorities are additional government initiated ‘moments’ intended to encourage adoption of a business model approach. Indeed, the preservation and future of many local small craft harbours has become contingent on the extent to which local authorities are successful in developing and applying the business model approach.

The trends in the evidence presented here suggest that, if continued, the future social profile of the small boat fisheries will be based on something other than family and kin connections. Perhaps professionalisation processes will replace family, kin and familiarity when it comes to recruiting, training, and regulating relations between new participants. The extent to which a primarily professionalised small boat fishery will be effective in encouraging and regulating practices within local harbour settings is unclear and uncertain at this point in time. Likewise, it is unknown how effective processes such as professionalisation will be respecting the transmission and use of local knowledge about fishing grounds and fishing practices.

Bereft of the humanising and regulatory effects of family, kin and familiar social relationships, it is as likely as not that small boat fishing will be composed largely of captains and enterprises even more dedicated to maximising economic returns than is presently the case. Such a development, for example, would have implications for the approach taken to fishing local grounds and resources. The single-minded pursuit of economic goals is often accompanied by a diminution in respect for others' conditions and needs. Further, any self-regulatory effects associated with a family and familiar-based livelihood would necessarily diminish and be replaced by increased investment in formal regulatory mechanisms and personnel. The spirit as well as the basis of co-operation and volunteerism within local community and harbour settings may also be compromised by such developments. In such settings and conditions, life and livelihood are framed increasingly with respect to formal institutions such as professional associations and trade unions. Personal success and satisfaction are contingent largely on abilities to navigate and to benefit from institutional settings and processes. Considerable re-tooling and new learning is required for many raised within more customary practices.

But, professionalisation is capable of assuring a measure of access for those keen to take up fishing, irrespective of their places of origins. Professionalisation also positions harvesters with more effective organisational means and 'voice' for direct involvement in management policy development and fisheries regulation than is the case in a family- and familiar-based fishery. Indeed, predominance of family and familiars in local social life tends to advantage relatives, family members and friends in matters such as participation and access. Obviously, such social conditions may limit or exclude the participation of persons from non-fishing backgrounds or from outside the local community area. Today, family, friendship, and social criteria are not acceptable bases, at least formally and with respect to law and regulations, for determining who will or will not have access to public resources and resource-based livelihoods. The one exception to this is in circumstances where treaty rights are acknowledged to exist, as in the case of the Mi'kmaq.

The character and direction of the social changes noted here have the potential to reshape the small boat fisheries. A number of unanswered questions come to mind. To what extent are these changes and their implications known to small boat fishing families and communities? And, to what

extent do these changes express the families' and communities' concerns, interests and will? Given the magnitude and implications of these changes, small boat fishing families and communities might now want to engage with these issues, with a view to achieving 'voice' and to claiming where possible determinant 'rights' respecting decisions and actions that have the potential to re-shape their livelihoods and social world.

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About SRSF . . .

Social Research for Sustainable Fisheries

Social Research for Sustainable Fisheries (SRSF) is a partnership linking university researchers and capacity with Mi'kmaq and inshore commercial fisheries community organizations. Although administered at St. Francis Xavier University, SRSF engages and represents a working collaboration between Guysborough County Inshore Fishermen's Association, the Gulf Nova Scotia Bonafide Fishermen's Association, the Paq'tnkek Fish and Wildlife Society, Afton Band and St.FX as well as other university-based social researchers. Additional fisheries and community organizations are linked with SRSF through relations with these core partners.

SRSF is funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) through its Community-University Research Alliance (CURA) programme. The basic purposes of SRSF are: to develop fisheries-focused social research linkages between university researchers and community organizations, to build social research capacity, and to facilitate specific fisheries social research activities that will examine the concerns of the partnered community organizations. Social research capacity, experience and linkages are developed through research-focused workshops and specific research projects.

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