



## Fishermen's Associations Independent Agents or Paper Tigers?

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SRSF  
Fact Sheet 10

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### The Challenge

Today, local fishermen's associations are an integral part of an increasingly complex network of fisheries management organizations. For many decades now local associations have provided their members with the opportunity to meet and discuss a variety of important local issues and to liaison with government agencies such as Fisheries and Oceans Canada. However, associations now provide a much broader range of services to their members, depending on the number and types of licenses their members hold and the vessel classes involved. In most cases fishermen hold a number of licenses and it often becomes necessary for local associations to send representatives to a large number of local, regional, provincial and sometimes national advisory boards. This inevitably places a strain on the association's human resources as members and staff are forced to spend more and more time attending meetings and keeping up with new developments in each fishery.

It is also the case today that fish harvester associations are carrying out regulatory functions that have been downloaded by government, concerning which they have little or no choice. They find themselves caught up in an increasingly complex bureaucracy that answers partly to the needs

### The Range of Tasks Now Performed by a Typical Fishermen's Association

- assist members in renewing or applying for licenses and determining license conditions
- provide members with fisheries information through mail-outs, faxes, phone calls, emails, etc.
- organize regular meetings to discuss fishery issues
- develop species management plans
- communicate regularly with DFO and DFA regarding new regulations, policies, etc.
- communicate regularly with the Department of Transport regarding vessel regulations
- act as a co-management agency for certain fisheries such as the Snow Crab fishery (negotiate and administer the quota, contracts and joint project agreements, buy gear, set up and administer a monitoring program, collect science fees, organize science log sheets, collect the association's share of crab sales and distribute sales income to members)
- organize mandatory training programs
- undertake research projects on issues of importance to members that are not given a high priority by DFO or other government agencies
- ensure that the association sends representatives to all advisory board meetings for all fisheries
- continually work at strengthening the capacity of the association to provide all of the above services
- secure and manage the funds necessary to carry out all of the above tasks

of their members and partly to the demands made on them by external government agencies. The challenge, then, is for associations to retain their independence and avoid being turned into mere instruments of the government, mere ‘paper tigers’.

The ability of fish harvesters to make a decent living thus depends, more and more, on the effectiveness of the organizations to which they belong, and not simply on their own fishing effort. The effectiveness of the organizations to which they belong, in turn, depends on their willingness to show up for meetings, to stay informed about current issues, and to serve on the many committees and advisory councils that set policy and make management decisions.

How actively involved are local fishermen in their associations? What are their associations’ strengths and weaknesses and how might they learn from one another’s experiences? This fact

### Membership Characteristics of GCIFA and GNSBFA

Figure 1 was created from data gathered through telephone interviews with fishermen in the Chedabucto Bay and St. Georges Bay regions. On the Chedabucto Bay side interviews were conducted by the Social Research for Sustainable Fisheries (SRSF) research team in the summer of 2001 ([www.stfx.ca/research/srsf](http://www.stfx.ca/research/srsf)) while interviews on the St. Georges Bay side were conducted earlier, in 1998, as part of the St. Georges Bay Ecosystem Project ([www.stfx.ca/research/gbayesp](http://www.stfx.ca/research/gbayesp)).

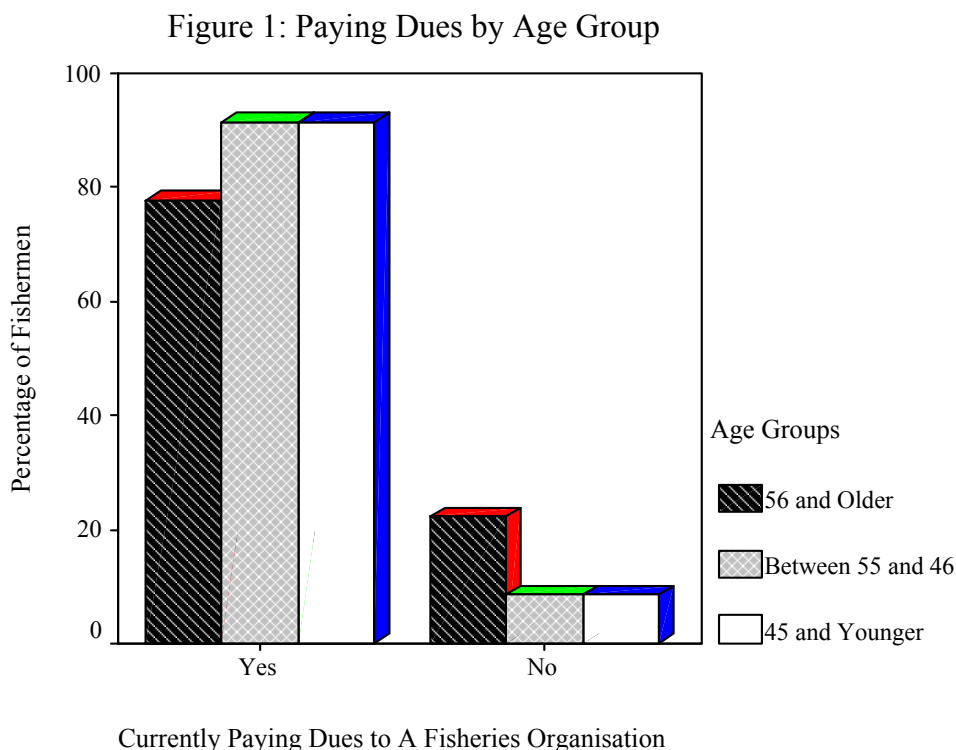


Figure 1 indicates the percentage of license holders in both regions reporting that they are dues-paying members of at least one fish harvester organization. The data indicates that the oldest age group, those 56 years of age or older, are most likely *not* to belong to any association. This reflects the fact that older fishermen began fishing during a time when associations played relatively minor roles in the fishing industry. They are less likely to expect that association membership will provide them with any tangible benefit. This is especially the case for those who expect to retire within the next few years.

Table 1 indicates the number of license holders in each of the specified age categories. It is significant to note that the fewest number of license holders in both regions, and by inference the fewest association members, are in the

Table 1: Number of Interviewed License Holders by Age Category			
	Chedabucto Bay	Gulf Nova Scotia	Totals
<b>56 or more years old</b>	50 (31.4%)	49 (38.6%)	99 (34.6%)
<b>46 to 55 years old</b>	43 (27.0%)	38 (29.9%)	81 (28.3%)
<b>45 or fewer years old</b>	66 (41.5%)	40 (31.5%)	106 (37.1%)
<b>Totals</b>	159 (100.0%)	127 (100.0%)	286 (100.0%)

Since the data shown in Figure 1 and Table 1 were gathered at a time when mandatory memberships were becoming the norm, the data must be considered to represent a transitional phase in the history of local fisheries organizations. During the time the interviews were conducted at least some fish harvesters were still choosing not to belong to any association. But fishermen in these two regions have now either lost or are in the process of losing the right to make that choice. In order to understand why this is so, it will be useful to review the history of the two associations and the government regulations that now make association memberships mandatory.

### A Short History of GCIFA

The fishermen in Guysborough County have belonged to a fisherman’s organization of one kind or another since the late sixties, when they joined the Maritime Fisherman’s Union. From 1972 to 1976 they belonged to the Union of Maritime Fisherman and a few fishermen also organized a local co-op. In 1977 the Canso Inshore Fisherman’s Development Association was incorporated and in 1979 the Canso Fisherman’s Hall Society was created in order to access government funding and build a fisherman’s hall on Union St. With the completion of this hall in 1980 fisherman were finally able to hold regular meetings and training sessions in their own facility. The Canso Inshore Fishermen’s Development Association then changed its name in 1993 to the Guysborough County Inshore Fishermen’s Association, reflecting the need for a county-wide association. This proved to be a successful strategy and by 1993 sixty fishermen from throughout the county had joined the association.

During 1994 the association was in danger of disbanding, however, due to a lack of involvement by members. The executive threatened to resign but the membership decided that the association was too valuable to let go and interest was renewed. New members were attracted to the association and more volunteers stepped forward to serve on advisory and management boards. Then, following the implementation of mandatory dues regulations in 1998, membership began to increase even more dramatically.

According to provincial legislation core fishermen within each provincial fishing region can choose whether or not all core fishermen in their region will be required by law to become a member and pay dues to at least one accredited fishermen’s association. Core fishermen in Region 3 (from the Canso Causeway to Halifax Harbor) voted to make membership mandatory in 1996 and this regulation came into effect in 1998. GCIFA then applied successfully that same year to become an accredited association and thus became eligible to represent core fishermen throughout Region

3. By 2000 GCIFA membership had grown to 120. As an accredited association GCIFA has thus been able to establish a much more dependable financial base for its activities and has also acquired a stronger voice in provincial fishery affairs.

While benefiting from the accreditation process and from mandatory membership regulations, the association nevertheless has to face the challenge of servicing a large number of new members, some of whom have joined only because they were required to by law. Members who join involuntarily are less likely than voluntary members to become involved in meetings, committees or decision-making processes within the association, or to serve in executive positions.

Around the same time that GCIFA became an accredited association they also gained access to the lucrative Snow Crab fishery off Eastern Nova Scotia. This occurred when DFO decided to allocate temporary Snow Crab quota to core fisherman who were adversely affected by the groundfish moratorium. However, the quota was not issued directly to individual fisherman. Instead, it came to associations to be managed for the fisherman who were dues-paying members. Largely as a consequence of GCIFA's role in allocating Snow Crab quota to its members, association membership rose to 135 by 2001.

## **A Short History of GNSBFA**

**G**NSBFA was created by “bonafide” (i.e. core) fishermen in the 1980s to serve the southern Gulf region of Nova Scotia and to provide a means for local fish harvesters to work towards the preservation of the fishing industry throughout the Maritime region. Like GCIFA, the association was created as a multi-species, rather than a special sector organization. It is based in Lakevale, Antigonish County, with members drawn, for the most part, from Lismore in Pictou County east to Auld's Cove in Antigonish County.

Up until 1998 association business was looked after entirely on a volunteer basis, with meetings being held ‘on the wharf’ and at other community meeting venues. Through the 1980s and 90s membership ranged from forty to sixty members but that number has grown steadily since 1998 when GNSBFA was registered as a non-profit organization and began the process of becoming a committed service provider for their membership. Fulfilling this commitment has proven to be a difficult task at the best of times. Gone are the days when fishermen's worries had to do with just fishing gear, ice, or species values and landings. Today fishermen are faced with challenges that far surpass these basic livelihood issues. As GNSBFA grows bigger it finds itself increasingly burdened by various roles and responsibilities within the fishing industry bureaucracy.

GNSBFA became an accredited fisheries organization in 2001 following the decision by core fishermen to make it mandatory for all fishermen in the region to belong to an accredited organization. Fisheries organizations pulled together to get fishermen to vote “yes”, believing that this decision would result in more accountable organizations, greater responsibility among all fishermen, increases in membership and a more equal sharing of organization costs, the elimination of smaller, redundant organizations, and a full representation of the region's fishermen. As of June 2002, all core fishermen from the N.B. border to the Inverness and Victoria County lines (an area

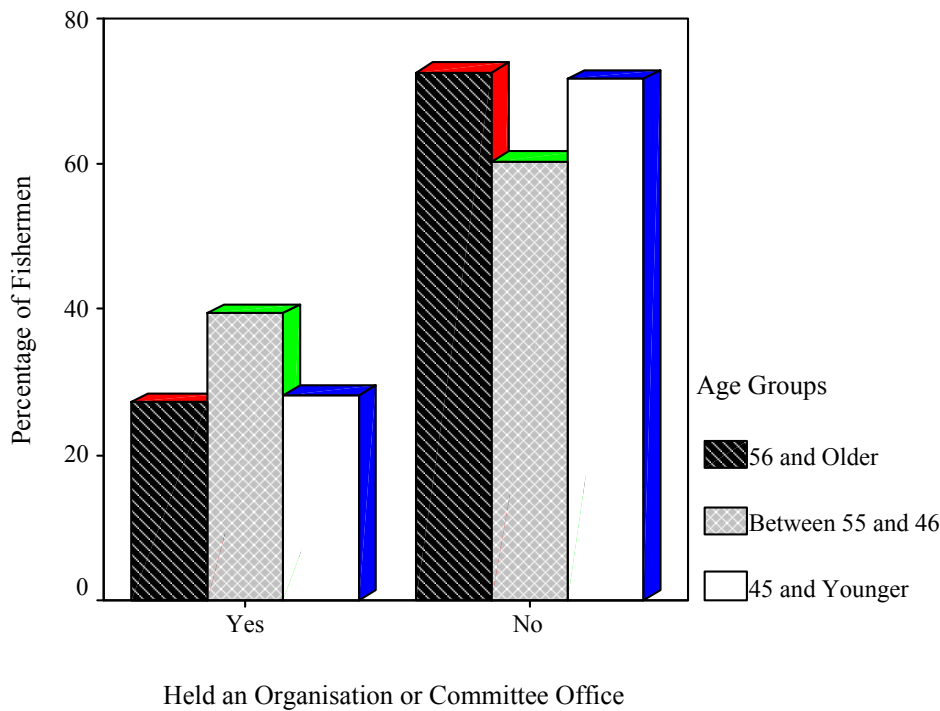
known as Region 1) will be required to belong to at least one accredited fisheries organization. As a consequence of the mandatory membership rule and GNSBFA’s growing capacity, the association’s membership had grown to 130 as of April 2002.

While the real process of accreditation was to create strong organizations, this is not exactly what has occurred in Region 1. Traditionally organizations within the Gulf region worked independently but closely together and relied on one another for support. Today, this is proving to be quite a challenge! Organizations that once stood united against imposed, unfair government decisions and policies are now competing for members and to play leading roles in policy development. Is this really what accreditation was meant to do?

During this turbulent time GNSBFA has managed to progress from its infancy stage to play a more prominent role within the Gulf Region. The association’s growth has occurred as a consequence

of partnerships created with other fisheries organizations and university researchers and the determined efforts of their membership – as they work towards the common goal of preserving and protecting the inshore fishery.

Figure 2: Held an Organisation or Committee Office by Age Group



### Who’s Doing the Work?

Figure 2 illustrates the fact that associations tend to depend most heavily on members in the 46-55 age category to actually do association

work. Younger members, who have less knowledge and experience in association matters, will tend to defer to more senior men. Those that do volunteer for committees will usually begin with less demanding positions, or will share the work load with a more experienced member. It is also the case that the debt loads carried by some younger members, for houses, boats and fishing licenses, can act to discourage their involvement. Older members, on the other hand, those above 55 years of age, tend to participate less intensively as they approach retirement. “I did my time – now its your turn” sums up the feelings of many older members. It is also the case that some of the most senior members are simply less inclined than younger members to volunteer for committee work since they are likely to have begun fishing during a time when associations provided far

fewer services than they do today. By default then, most committee work falls on the shoulders of the middle age group, who have been around long enough to realize that “somebody has to do it”, and who see it as their duty to hold one or more positions for a certain period of time.

While the data presented in Figure 2 indicates a pattern typical of most fish harvester associations, such patterns vary from association to association depending on local conditions and organizational history. In the case of GCIFA, for instance, members take responsibility for a total of about 35 committee/executive positions at any one time, many of these positions being shared by two members. This relatively high level of participation has not come into effect overnight but as a consequence of the hard work of a much smaller group over a period of several decades. Having achieved this relatively high level of participation, it is not usually difficult now for GCIFA to find new volunteers when necessary. The membership of GNSBFA, on the other hand, a newer organization with less infrastructure, take responsibility for only 8 committee/executive positions and those who are active often find it difficult to recruit new volunteers. Also, those who are active within GNSBFA don’t tend to remain active for nearly as long as in the case of GCIFA.

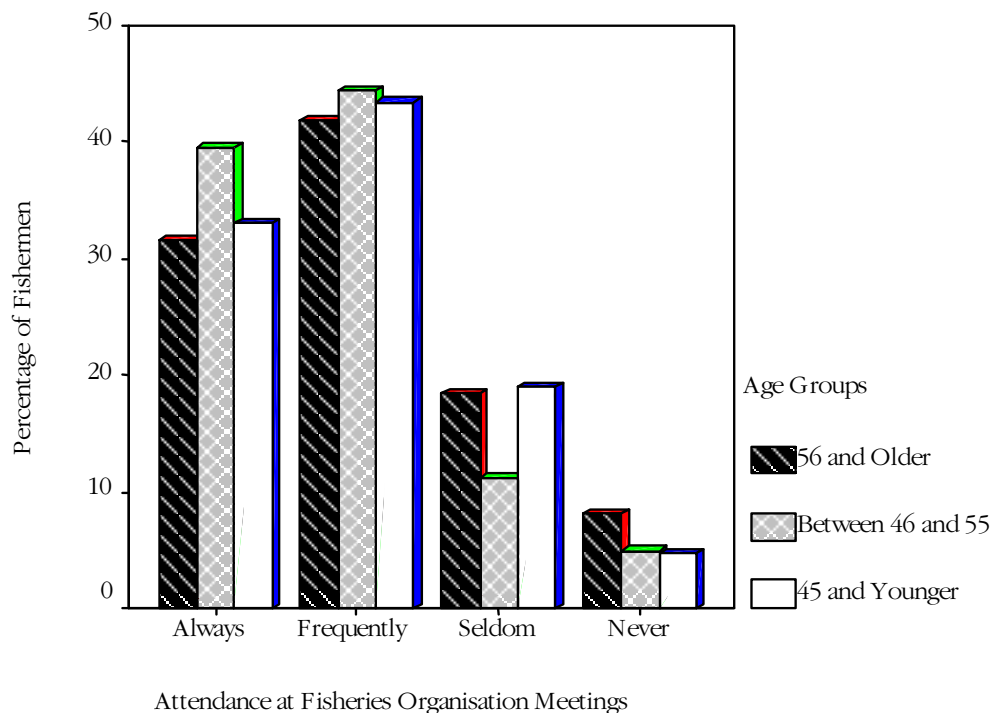
Building up of a strong core of active members is clearly one of the major challenges facing an association during the first few decades of its existence. An interesting strategy developed by GCIFA is to pair a new-

comer to committee work with an ‘old hand’ in order to provide an easy entry for the newcomer into committee work and to provide training/ support as necessary. This strategy also helps alleviate the issues likely to arise as a consequence of declining recruitment to the fisheries. Fewer people are entering the fisheries at the same time as the quantity of committee work is increasing.

Means need to be

found for bringing the younger group as quickly as possible into full participation.

Figure 3: Meeting Attendance by Age



**Who shows up at the meetings?**

The surveys results indicate that a relatively high percentage of all age groups attend association meetings (see Figure 3). To some extent this reflects the fact that virtually all fishermen today recognize that they need to stay up-to-date with what is going on in the fisheries. DFO has a long history of not involving fishermen in policy and management decisions and most fishermen understand that their only strength lies in numbers and that things will continue to be pushed upon them if they don't actively provide their input. With the introduction of mandatory memberships, it is also true that some individuals show up simply because they want to make sure their membership dues are being used to their benefit.

However, it is also the case that attendance at meetings today has become far more important than in the past due to the fact that many of the services once provided by DFO, Transport Canada and the Coast Guard have been passed onto the backs and pocketbooks of fishermen. Twenty years ago a fisherman only needed a boat, fishing gear, a compass and a license but today he must concern himself with wharf and harbour maintenance, with mandatory training and safety courses, vessel regulations, licensing conditions, legal contracts, species management plans, and with the many issues surrounding the entry of the Mi'kmaq into the fisheries. Once the downloading started, regular meetings and coordinated action through local and regional organizations became a necessary part of fishing for a living.

Figure 3 indicates that a significantly higher percentage of individuals in the 46-55 age category report "always" attending meetings. Slightly more individuals in this age category also report attending meetings "frequently" as opposed to "seldom" or "never". This is consistent with the information presented in Figure 2 concerning the higher participation rate of this group on association committees and executive positions. It should be kept in mind that these are the individuals who have survived as fishermen despite the Atlantic Groundfish Strategy (TAGS) buyouts, the recalls of licenses, the added-on expenses of today's fisheries, the quota cuts, the collapse of the ground fishery and so on. They have remained despite DFO's deliberate attempt to 'weed them out' on the basis of policy that says there are 'too many fishermen chasing too few fish'. The turmoil experienced by these individuals during their lifetimes in the fishery has left them with a sense of urgency and the sense that participation in their local association is an essential part of their struggle to remain fishermen.

Figures 2 and 3 together also highlight another important issue for associations. A notable percentage of those in the youngest age group report that they 'seldom' or 'never' attend meetings, sit on committees or hold positions in their associations. In order to develop further as dynamic representative organizations, associations must focus on attracting and encouraging a greater level of participation among the youngest fishing captains.

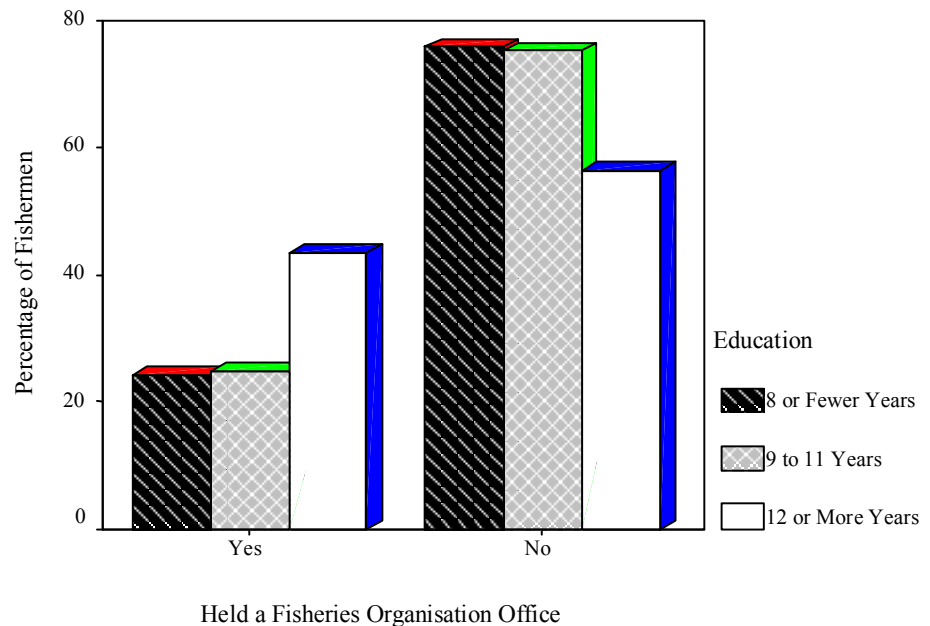
## **The Role of Education in Fisheries Management**

Fishermen have traditionally learned their fishing skills, whether in the area of navigation, fishing gear technology, or ecological knowledge such as identifying fish species or 'reading' weather patterns, through years of hands-on apprenticeships with fathers or other family members. With a 25-cent license and a small boat, you could once engage in a very satisfying and uncompli-

cated livelihood, but this is no longer possible. When one reviews the list of tasks now performed by fishermen and their organizations (see page 1), it is apparent that fishermen must have access to the services of engineers, accountants, lawyers, market analysts, consultants and scientists.

The business of fishing and the management of fisheries has become very complicated and requires ever more training and education. Figure 4 indicates one of the ways in which this impacts on fishermen as it shows that fully 45% of those who volunteer for association work have more than 12 years of formal education – significantly above the average for both GNSBFA and GCIFA members.

Figure 4: Held a Fisheries Organisation Office by Education



Accounting skills are needed to insure a fair return on your time and money investments such as financing for a boat that costs in excess of \$100,000. Legal skills are needed when fishermen sign a contract with DFO to enter a new fishery. Engineering skills are needed to install and operate a computer program for navigational purposes. The 'business' of fishing now requires that fishermen send representatives to thirty or more advisory boards. Their representatives must be proficient in many topics from Transport Canada rules and regulations to the process of creating a regional species management plan. While participating on these committees it is necessary to review documents and create new documents reflecting historical or future trends within a fishery. Writing and comprehension skills are paramount to gaining and retaining access to new quotas or sustaining existing ones. The need for formal education is increasing every day within the fishing industry and those who have survived and will survive, are more and more challenged to obtain capacity-building training or must already have this background when entering the fishery.

It is not at all surprising that those who have more formal education feel more secure in volunteering or participating as organizational representatives. Figure 1 illustrates that all age categories are paying dues and are participating as members in fisheries organizations. Education has not hindered their recognized need to belong to an association. Figure 4, however, highlights another serious issue. If members with fewer years of formal education become reluctant to volunteer for representative positions, associations will have an even harder time filling the many positions that now exist.



## **Social Research for Sustainable Fisheries (SRSF)**

SRSF is a partnership linking university researchers and capacity with Mi'kmaq and commercial small boat fisheries community organizations. Although administered at St. Francis Xavier University, SRSF represents a working collaboration between Guysborough County Inshore Fishermen's Association, the Gulf Nova Scotia Bonafide Fishermen's Association, the Paqtnkek Fish and Wildlife Commission located at Afton and St.F.X researchers. Other university-based social researchers and 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 (SSHRCC) through its Community-University Research Alliance (CURA) program. 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.



### **HOW TO CONTACT US:**

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[www.stfx.ca/research/srsf/welcome.htm](http://www.stfx.ca/research/srsf/welcome.htm)



**Gulf Nova Scotia  
Bonafide  
Fishermen's  
Association  
(GNSBFA)**

The Gulf Nova Scotia Bonafide Fishermen's Association is an organization formed to represent the interests and concerns of the Nova Scotia bonafide fishermen working within the Lower Northumberland Strait, Southern Gulf of St. Lawrence and St. Georges Bay regions. The GNSBFA's first responsibility is to represent its membership's concerns in fisheries management meetings that decide on subjects such as policy, annual allocations, regulations, and fishing effort. The GNSBFA recognizes that fulfilling this responsibility requires that it have access to and knowledge about research and research results. An example of the GNSBFA's interest and involvement in research is the St. Georges Bay Ecosystem Project. The GNSBFA is a founding partner in this project and has been instrumental in its definition and development.

Starting in 1999 GNSBFA became involved in the SRSF project which runs until March 2003. To find out more about the research GNSBFA has engaged in through SRSF contact our office.

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**Guysborough County  
Inshore Fishermen's  
Association (GCIFA)**



The Guysborough County Inshore Fishermen's Association is a group of Inshore Fishermen originally formed in 1973. Currently its membership consists of 135 fishermen, most of whom have CORE Status (86%). The focus of the organization is to develop working relations among Eastern Guysborough County fishermen for the purposes of:

- implementing more effective participatory approaches to local fisheries management;
- developing research conducive to sustaining the traditional fisheries, and;
- assisting local communities and fisheries to remain economically and socially viable.

Through the years the GCIFA has conducted much research on the ecology, sociology, and economics of the Guysborough County area. The results from most of these studies have been summarized and included on our website. For more in-depth results you may wish to contact the Association.

**HOW TO CONTACT US:**

**We are on the web!**  
[www.gcifa.ns.ca](http://www.gcifa.ns.ca)

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