

Federal fisheries management guided by 'too many fishermen' chant

"My son is already set up to inherit my boat and licenses. But, he has other things planned as well. You can not make a living off the fishery anymore"

(Richmond County, Nova Scotian small boat fisherman)

Recent decades have seen a major policy assault by fisheries management authorities on coastal com-

munity-centered small boat fisheries. Arguably, this assault has been a primary feature of recent eco-

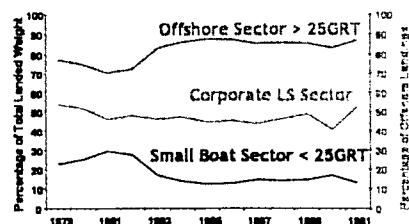
nomic and ecological fisheries' crises.

The assault began in the 1960s with the claim that Atlantic Canada had "too many fishermen chasing too few fish." It was and remains led by a cabal of Fisheries and Oceans' resource economists, scientists, and senior managers

who believe that most fisheries problems are reducible to a simple population equation.

That is, they insist that there are too many fishermen exploiting marine resources to enable the development of an economically viable, modern fishing industry. But instead

Distribution of groundfish landings by sector, 1979-1991, Nova Scotia.



Fishing power, not 'too many fishermen chasing too few fish', accounts for over-exploitation and resource collapse.



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of making a direct attack on small boat fishing communities, which would have been politically unacceptable, policy makers shifted focus to 'resource conservation' as the first priority.

Of course right from the outset, meeting 'resource conservation' priorities required dramatic reductions in the numbers fishing and in fishing effort.

The fisheries management solution to the problem of 'too many fishermen' and 'resource conservation' has been policies that reduce participation and consolidate fishing effort in fewer fishing ports. Policies such as limited entry licensing, sector quotas, individual enterprise quotas, and individual transferable quotas are guided by these ideas. Over the last 25 years or so Atlantic Canada's family-centered and community-based small boat fisheries have been tagged as the prime target for regulation and down-sizing.

Yet, a brief review of pre-moratorium information shows that the corporate industrial sector and offshore fishing rather than the small boat fisheries were largely responsible for marine resource depletion (see Figure 1).

What this information clearly shows is that, in Nova Scotia, the corporate sector (minimally represented by vessels 100 ft. or longer) accounted for a notably disproportionate share of groundfish land-

ings, while employing relatively few vessels and persons.

The small boat sector (boats under 25 gross tonnes and mostly fishing within the coastal zone) accounts for the smallest proportion of landings. This is the sector that employs the vast majority of persons and boats.

The 'corporate' category only includes the landings from vessels 100 ft. in length or longer, all of which are corporately owned. In addition to these landings, the 'offshore' category includes the landings of vessels over 25 gross tonnes but less than 100 ft. in length. A substantial portion of this sector is also corporately owned and/or controlled.

This elementary walk through government statistics shows that resource depletion has occurred primarily as an outcome of large vessel, corporate, offshore fishing power and not because of the many people and boats participating in the small boat fisheries.

So, why is federal fisheries management still guided by the chant 'too many fishermen chasing too few fish', and why are they continuing their assault on family- and community-centered small boat fisheries?

The concise answer to this is simply that the corporate sector has been in a far better position to influence policy than have been small boat fishers and their representative associations.

To some extent this influence derives from the corporate offshore sector's economic power, which provides ready access to government ministers and bureaucrats. But it is also the case that government ministers, policy makers, managers and analysts share the world view and values of corporate owners and managers.

Corporate behaviour is valued as representative of modern and developed industry. Consequently the corporate sector is held to embody the core economic principles of rational organization within a market- and profit-dedicated economy.

In contrast, the small boat sector is thought of as backward, chaotic and inefficient. Its knowledge base, skills, family and community attributes are neither understood nor valued.

A measure of these influences is evident in the fact that Fisheries and Oceans 'resource conservation' agenda has never given priority to eliminating ecologically disastrous mass, non-selective drag net harvesting practices within the corporate and offshore sectors. Instead, coastal zone, seasonal small boat fishing has been targeted as the core problem needing redress if the fisheries are to achieve sustainability and viability.

The dismantling of traditional recruitment processes has been a key component of the policy assault on small boat fisheries' families and communities.

For many fishing families, limited entry licensing and quotas policies have fermented internal tensions and conflict. Many now confront impossibly difficult choices such as selecting those who will receive licenses and quota from among sons and daughters wanting to fish, or selling out to others in order to assure adequate retirement funds.

What can be done?

Several practical steps could be taken to improve the current situation. First of all, the impact of fisheries management on the socio-economic sustainability of fishing families, communities and the small boat fishery should be assessed.

Policies found to threaten sustainability, including the social processes critical to recruitment, should be eliminated and a more family- and community-centered management system developed.

Secondly, new policies and legislation are needed in order to strengthen the resource management 'voice' of small boat fisheries representative associations.

Nations such as Norway and Japan have employed legislation to empower fisheries associations in matters such as representation, dues payment, ownership of fishing capacity, and port markets.

In Norway, government has also set aside a portion of groundfish quotas exclusively for the use of new entrants, especially young men and women from fishing families keen to fish during the summer. This measure provides employment while also assisting the recruitment process.

Thirdly, federal and provincial governments might consider developing a differential taxation system that provides benefits for rural, primary resource livelihoods and communities. A modest reduction in provincial sales taxes, federal income taxes, and the goods and service tax would encourage people to stay in rural communities, thereby contributing to community and livelihood vitality.

Finally, more money should be spent on fisheries-related education, research and development programs.

In 2002, Nova Scotia's fisheries exports generated over one billion dollars in earnings, far outpacing all sectors other than oil and gas. The fisheries continue to be this province's and the Atlantic Region's most dis-

tinguishing primary resource and, unlike wealth generated in oil and gas, fisheries income largely stays in the region.

Despite this fact, Canada has failed to develop the extensive fisheries-focused education and research institutions characteristic of other major fishing nations. Such investments would assist the region to increase, diver-

sify and sustain the economic benefits of marine resources while also elevating the social status of fisheries-related livelihoods and thereby increasing interest in and recruitment to fishing.

Such investments will also be necessary to achieve the full benefits of the information-based 'new economy'. Certainly Atlantic Canada must stop

the practice of being the fisheries equivalent of a Value Village outlet, i.e., selling resources for bargain-basement values.

This essay has been prepared by members of the Social Research for Sustainable Fisheries (SRSF) at St. Francis Xavier University, Antigonish, NS, with contributions from: Anthony Davis, SRSF Direc-

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