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The Navigator

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Fishermen's Associations: Independent Agent or Paper Tiger?

— A Northeastern Nova Scotia viewpoint —

By: Virginia Boudreau, Kay
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Fisheries management has become an increasingly complex task over recent decades, with local fishermen's associations now providing their members with an ever-growing range of services. Association staff members organize and attend meetings, make arrangements for mandatory training programs, provide members with information (through mail-outs, phone calls, etc.) They also assist members in obtaining and renewing fishing licenses, communicate regularly with DFO and Transport Canada regarding new regulations, organize association representation at all advisory board meetings, act as fisheries co-management agencies, undertake research

projects, manage fund-raising activities and much more.

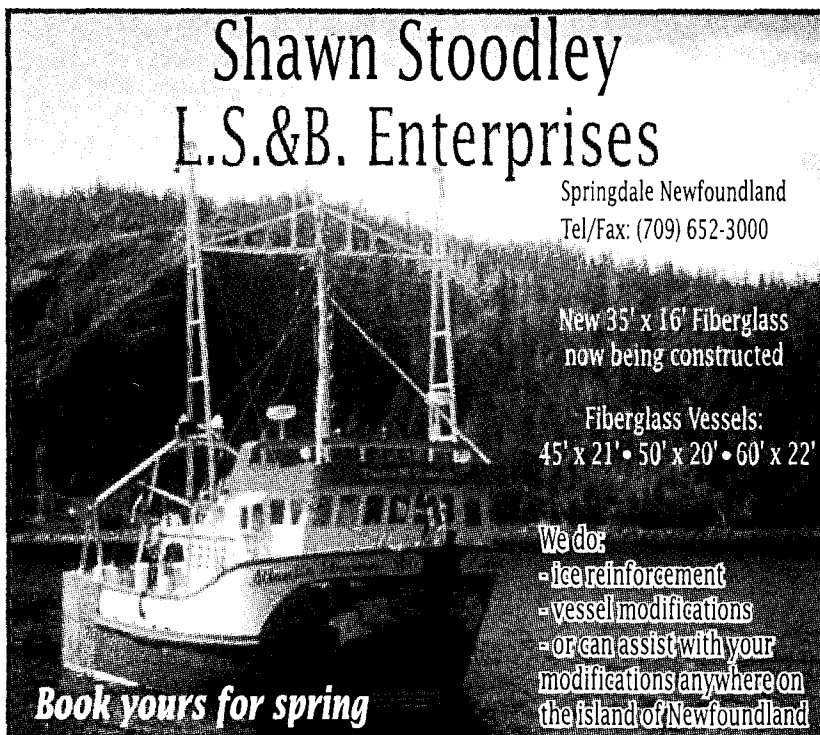
To some extent, this expanded range of services is the result of increasing demands made on local associations by their members. But it is also true that government agencies, in order to reduce their own costs, are regularly downloading regulatory functions on local associations. Are fish harvester associations now at risk of losing their independence and becoming mere 'paper tigers'?

The ability of fish harvesters to make a living now depends at least as much on the effectiveness of their associations as it does on their own skills and effort on the water. 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 article examines these issues with reference to research conducted by two Northeastern Nova Scotia fishermen's associations – the Guysborough County Inshore Fishermen's Association (GCIFA) and the Gulf Nova Scotia Bonafide Fishermen's Association (GNSBFA). The membership of GCIFA is composed of fishers living in the Chedabucto Bay region and communities as far south as Liscomb, while GNSBFA members fish in the southern Gulf of St. Lawrence region, from Pictou to Auld's Cove. Members of both associations are small boat fish harvesters with lobster and snow crab now being the most important fisheries. Over the last ten years, mainly as a consequence of mandatory membership regulations, both organizations have more than doubled their memberships to 130.

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Who's Doing the Work?

SRSF research indicates that over 80% of members in all age-groups report that they 'regularly' or 'frequently' attend association meetings. Twenty years ago a fisherman only needed a boat, fishing gear, a compass and a license to fish. That has changed. Today, he must concern himself with wharf and harbour maintenance, mandatory safety courses, vessel regulations, fishing license conditions, monitoring programs, species management plans, and with the many issues surrounding the entry of the Mi'kmaq into the fisher-



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ies. High attendance levels at meetings no doubt reflects the fact that fishermen today fully recognize that local associations play a critical role in protecting their interests and keeping them up up-to-date.

SRSF research also indicates, however, that a significantly higher percentage of individuals in the 46-55 age category report "always" or "frequently" attending meetings than do those in younger and older age categories. Research also indicates that individuals in the 46-55 age group are more likely to volunteer for committee work and executive positions. This appears to be the outcome of a number of factors. Firstly, older members (55 or more years of age), tend to participate less intensively as they approach retirement. "I did my time - now it's your turn" appears to sum up the feelings of many. It is also the case that some of the most senior members began fishing during a time when associations provided far fewer services than they do today. These individuals are simply less inclined than younger members to invest a lot of time in association work. Secondly, younger members (45 or younger), feel that they have less experience in association matters and tend to defer to more senior men. Many younger members also carry heavier debt loads than do more senior members, for houses, boats and fishing licenses, and resulting financial pressures often constrain their willingness to invest time in association work. Finally, it is also the case that the middle age group is comprised almost entirely of individuals who have survived as fishermen in the face of enormous obstacles. They have survived license recalls, quota reductions, the collapse of the ground fisheries, TAGS buyouts and ever-escalating costs. They have survived DFO's deliberate attempt to 'weed them out' on the basis of policy that says there are

'too many fishermen chasing too few fish'. By default, most committee work falls on their shoulders and as 'survivors' they fully recognize the fact that "somebody has to do it".

Building up of a strong core of active members and encouraging greater participation by the youngest fishing captains are clearly among the major challenges facing fishermen's association today. Recognizing this fact, GCIFA has developed the strategy of pairing a newcomer to committee work with an 'old hand' in order to provide the newcomer with training and support. This strategy also helps to offset problems associated with a declining recruitment in the fisheries. Since fewer young people are now entering the fisheries, ways must be found for bringing them as quickly as possible into full participation.

SRSF research also indicates that level of education is a factor in determining who volunteers for committee work. 45% of those who report volunteering for association positions have more than 12 years of formal education - significantly above the average for both associations. Level of education has never been a factor in determining who shows up for meetings but, given the increasing amount of technical reading and paper work involved, it has become a factor in determining who signs on for committee work. Thus, it becomes ever harder to fill committee positions as members with fewer years of formal education become reluctant to take on those responsibilities.

The SRSF collaboration itself has served as one strategy by which GCIFA and GNSBFA have sought to address education issues. By working together with university researchers and students, association staff and membership have enhanced their capacity for conducting research and for keep-

ing members informed on current issues.

Looking to the Future

DFO, as regulators of the fisheries, are *beginning* to relinquish their hold on management but rather than give away real power, their practice to date has been to download a variety of bureaucratic functions onto fishermen's associations. Since fishermen are not able, for time, money and possibly education or capacity reasons, to take over management roles fully, they are now forced to hire professional managers and consultants with specialized training in management and business administration to carry out these roles. Thus it would seem that another layer of bureaucracy is being created and those who should have the real decision-making power may yet again be denied. The increasingly strong role of fishermen's associations, supported to some measure by recent changes in DFO policy, is thus a double-edged sword. It presents fishermen with the opportunity to play a stronger role in fisheries management, but also with the challenge of having to build strong, independent and financially sound enterprises. †

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(for more information on the SRSF collaboration see their website at: <http://www.stfx.ca/research/srsf/2001.htm>).