

Partners or Predators? Fisheries researchers and the need for protocols

BY ANTHONY DAVIS

Many small boat marine harvesters have participated in research of one sort or another. Sometimes they are asked to answer survey questions about their fishing activities and livelihoods.

On other occasions they are asked to participate in marine and resource assessment research, donating boat and labor time in a variety of activities that range from taking environmental measurements, through sampling studies, to tagging and record keeping. Arguably, participation in research has become such a regular activity that it is fast becoming an ordinary, almost expected, feature of the marine harvesting livelihood.

Today, many representative organizations (associations, cooperatives, and unions) enter into 'research partnerships' on behalf of their members with Fish-

"Scientists have screwed us too many times before, and I'm tired of all of the surveys. I've contributed to science plenty of times before."

"I'm not interested in doing this because I think that the more surveys I do the worse off I get."

(Richmond and Guysborough County fishermen refusing to participate in a research project)

eries and Oceans, private consultancy firms, and/or university researchers.

Partnerships of these sorts are perceived by some as a way for marine harvesters and their representative organizations to be taken seriously and to obtain, hopefully, more influence within resource management decision-making.

Given the uncertainties and risks associated with marine resources, management plans, incomes and costs, some have argued that today's small boat marine harvesters and their organizations have little choice but to become involved in research.

There are also justified fears that such 'research partnerships' are little more than another instance of Fisheries and Oceans down-loading the costs and burdens of research onto small boat marine harvesters and their organizations.

Welcomed or not, research-based understandings are critical to developing sustainable fisheries and fisheries management. Yet, for many research is designed and conducted in a manner where harvesters and their organizations have little, if any, say in or control over the research processes. The term 'research partnership' is often thrown about

in order to provide assurances. Yet, many report that they rarely receive feedback about the results from the research project, and are not informed about any benefits.

Without such knowledge and feedback many participants rightly conclude that they have been manipulated. As a result, many have become feed-up and now refuse to participate in research of any kind. In refusing, people are acknowledging that 'information is power'. The irresponsible practices of researchers have contributed to an understanding that participation in research will only reduce independence.

For their part, researchers certainly seek 'the power' resident in information. As such, researchers might be best understood as information predators. While most are well-intended and well-meaning, once the information sought has been gathered priority is often given to analyzing the 'data' for conference, research publication, and reporting back to superiors, rather than, first, for communication and engagement with small boat or organizational partners and participants.

This is a very serious issue. Research-based understandings are critical; yet, people are entirely justified and likely wise in refusing to participate in research when the implications the research has for their livelihoods, interests and concerns are, at best, unclear.

What then are the obligations and responsibilities of those who do research? What measures will ensure feedback and knowledge of any benefits? And, what steps can provide research participants with the opportunity to define research priorities, processes and outcomes, and thereby benefit directly from research?

Today, most research involving people, when it originates from universities, non-governmental organizations, and government agencies, must go through a formal ethics review. At universities researchers are required to submit documents outlining the research and its procedures to an ethics review committee.

Research participants should request either to review or to receive copies of ethics review documents. Review would assist in-

formed decision making about participation. It would also provide knowledge of where to go later with complaints and queries if the researchers' promises and assurances are left largely unfulfilled.

Notably, researchers are neither expected nor required to inform participants about the ethics committee process, let alone provide them with copies of the ethics review documents.

Canada's First Nations are leading the way when it comes to finding solutions to this situation. Many First Nations have now developed Research Protocols that define the procedures to be followed by persons or institutions desiring to conduct research within their communities.

Many First Nations also want to ensure that research projects within their communities address issues that are important to them. Further, First Nations want assurances that they will receive or have unconditional access to copies of all data gathered and all reports based on that data. Finally, there is a deep concern that the research process show respect for the participating First Nations.

These concerns and issues are not relevant only to First Nations, they are equally pertinent to most individuals and groups routinely asked to participate in research. Small boat marine harvesters and their representative organizations would be well-advised to adopt a similar stance and to insist on binding research protocol agreements.

A research protocol is a formal agreement negotiated between all parties engaged in a specific research undertaking and process. Those initiating the research are obligated to identify and to negotiate the terms and conditions of the proposed research with the communities, organizations, and/or peoples involved.

The research protocol should specify terms and conditions such as: the issues being researched, the purpose of the research, the methodology or methodologies being employed and procedures respecting provision for obtaining informed consent and for assuring confidentiality.

A research protocol negotiated with regard to terms

and conditions such as these transforms the research process into a dynamic collaboration of equal partners. Research that is respectful and considerate of all participants' concerns and interests should be developed as a partnership among equals.

Further, as a partnership and collaboration, research processes must be transparent and must clearly specify all partners' responsibilities and obligations.

Since 'information is power', the Research Protocol approach would make sure that all the information gathered is shared among the partners. It also offers the likelihood that issues of concern to all partners will be front and centre within the research.

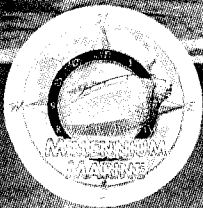
Signing on to a formally negotiated and framed agreement also provides participants with more than moral authority and persuasion about research processes and outcomes. The Research Protocol model might be developed as a contract in law that binds signatories to its specific terms and conditions, without obligating participation by each and every small boat harvester.

Fisheries organizations have a leadership responsibility to define protocols as well as to negotiate agreements in order to assure that research is framed and guided by Research Protocols.

Memberships should require their executives to develop and to follow protocols and protocol procedures before entering into research partnerships. Fisheries research has serious implications for fish harvesters and fishing communities.

Negotiated, formal Research Protocols offer assurances for all participants that research processes will involve full and equal partnerships, from the outset, that hold the promise for mutually desirable outcomes and benefits.

These qualities will assure at least containment of researchers' predatory practices respecting information, while also assuring real and substantial research partnerships.



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