

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 (Guysborough County fish harvester)."

INTRODUCTION

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 Thiessen 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

A social profile of the lobster license holders who participated in the study 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.

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 relationships, through both descent and marriage. Table 2 presents information that

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

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

family and kin are also a primary

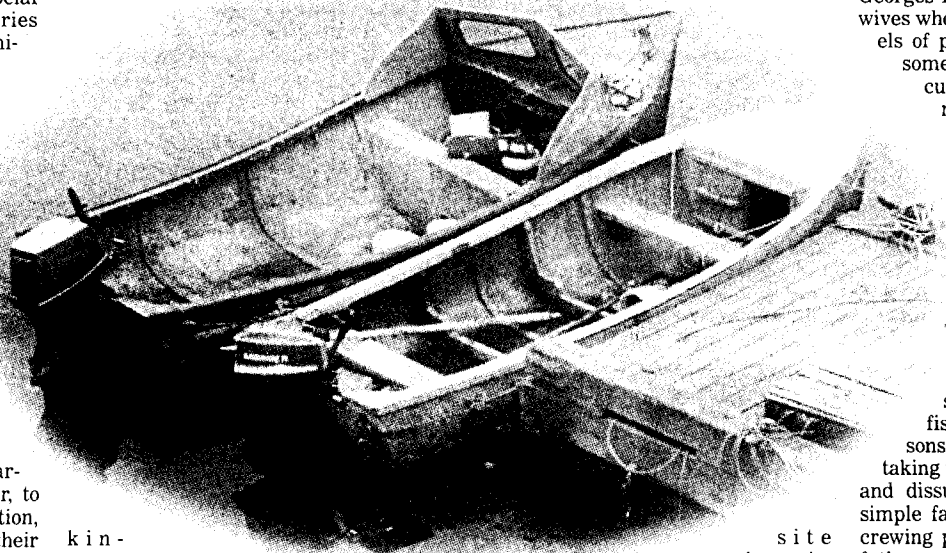
These differences are likely associated with the fact that few livelihood options to fishing have been available within the Chedabucto Bay region, while livelihood alternatives such as trades and farming have been much more accessible for people living in the St. Georges Bay area.

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 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



Alain Meuse/SW

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.

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 fam-

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.

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,

New entrants used to come from fishing families

From page 3
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.

(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 raise very important questions concerning the ways and means participants are being recruited to and retained in 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 advantages and privileges those with connections and access to means, espe-

cially 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.

The limited entry licensing and quota allocation systems, as designed and implemented, acknowledge federal ('Crown') ownership of marine resources and authority respecting the granting of access to them. The license and quota systems are designed to allocate and to regulate 'privileges' distributed by the grace of the government as the proprietor and 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 har-

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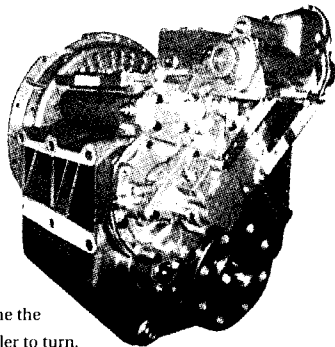
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