

Fisheries, scientists to debate accusations

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TODAY, federal Fisheries and Oceans Department officials, their critics and experts from around the world will publicly debate issues that have turned the traditionally placid waters of Canadian fisheries science into a feeding ground for media sharks and anti-Fisheries piranhas.

At issue is a 12-page, 51-footnote scientific paper soberly entitled: Is Scientific Inquiry Compatible with Government Information Control? Much to the surprise of both those for and against it, the paper's argument that Canadian fisheries science can sometimes be soiled by Canadian fisheries politics has become a news item.

"I expected there would be some reaction, but I didn't expect it would be anywhere near as persistent as it has been," said Richard Haedrich, a Memorial University of Newfoundland biologist who is one of the co-authors.

The issues raised in the paper include:

- Did the department try to suppress research that showed overfishing and not seal predation or environmental change was the most significant cause of the collapse of the East Coast fishery?
- Did Fisheries dramatically play down the number of seals being taken in the annual seal hunt strictly for their penises?
- Was Brian Tobin, when he was fisheries minister, behind these efforts?
- Did the federal department go out of its way to make it difficult for a study to be published on the successes and failures in a West Coast salmon enhancement program, and was the author subsequently punished for his findings?
- Were Fisheries scientists routinely reprimanded for speaking out in public on contentious issues?
- Was politically sensitive scientific data shredded or discarded?
- Did the department work to keep cod from being designated an endangered species?

In the midst of all this, two St. Francis Xavier professors have charged that these questions were an example of scientists deflecting blame on the politicians and bureaucrats for the scientists' own failures in predicting fisheries collapses.

The Fisheries Department response was to categorically deny many of the charges, play down the significance of others and point to changes in evaluation procedures begun in 1993 which it believes address many of the concerns of its critics.

Any number of ironies attach

DANGEROUS WATERS / Some researchers say results have been suppressed by politics, but the federal department strongly disagrees.

themselves to the summer of *sturm und drang*.

First, the controversial paper itself almost died on the vine. Sensing how strong and negative the reviews of his analysis would be, the lead author, 38-year-old, untenured Dalhousie University biology professor Jeffrey Hutchings began having strong and negative second thoughts about publishing his critique.

"One starts to think about possible repercussions. To what extent could funding be cut my way, to what extent could future collaboration with DFO scientists be cut off? I felt one thing the department might do, is what it has done — attack me and co-authors personally," said Prof. Hutchings, who worked with Fisheries as a postdoctoral student for several years.

"At the last minute, I almost decided not to go ahead with it. I said to Dick Haedrich [one of his

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co-authors], 'Here it is, you do what you want.'" However, his colleagues would not let him abandon what they viewed as a necessary and important effort to bring the question of politicized fisheries science to the fore. "People's reaction when I told them I was thinking of pulling out was almost angry," he said.

Buoyed by this, he persisted. "I really felt that if there was something wrong, then there was a moral responsibility on the part of university people to discuss the thing."

The second irony is that there is a general perception that the department's ferocious response to the paper served to draw attention to a discussion that otherwise might only have drifted about in the introspective narrowness of academe. "What

seemed to me particularly stupid and not well thought out was DFO's knee-jerk flails," Prof. Haedrich said.

When preprints of the paper were circulated, senior Fisheries officials made efforts to stop publication until a rejoinder by the department could be drafted and included.

When the paper's authors resisted this, saying they were more comfortable with a response appearing in a subsequent issue, then deputy minister William Rowat sent an angry letter to the National Research Council, which publishes the journal. He wrote NRC president Arthur Carthy that "these are not scientific papers. They are tabloid journalism of the sort one would not expect to encounter in a scientific journal. . . I deeply regret NRC officials have allowed the Canadian Journal of Fisheries and Aquatic Sciences to be misused by a privileged few."

The journal's editor, David Cook, who had included an editorial outlining Fisheries efforts to change some previous articles in the journal, told journalists that he had been advised not to talk to them.

A few days later, Ransom Myers, a Dalhousie professor, former Fisheries scientist and a close collaborator with Prof. Hutchings, described to the Ottawa Citizen what he alleged were politically motivated efforts to suppress some of his research concerning the role of seals in the collapse of the Atlantic cod stocks.

In response, both he and the paper were sued for libel by Scott Parsons, the department's assistant deputy minister for science, and William Doubleday, director-general of Fisheries and Oceans Science.

In direct response, 37 scientists wrote an open letter of support of both Dr. Cook's decision to print the paper and the paper's conclusions. Groups interested in protecting seals took on the costs of Prof. Myers's legal defence.

Why did the department react so forcefully? Guilt may be one possible explanation. There is a widespread understanding in the department that its overly optimistic stock assessments through the 1980s meant that it must share some of the blame in the collapse of the Atlantic fisheries.

Some Fisheries scientists admit to still feeling guilt-stricken about their role in the

catastrophe. "It is difficult to live with," said Moncton Fisheries manager Michael Chadwick.

Prof. Myers, who before joining Dalhousie this year worked for the Fisheries Department for 12 years, added, "Anyone who was involved in the system who doesn't feel guilty doesn't have a soul."

Nonetheless, many of those involved fervently believe that whatever errors were made were not ill-intentioned. "We don't mind people saying we made mistakes, but they were honest mistakes. Implicating us in deliberate tampering, well, we find that offensive," Dr. Doubleday said.

"And what annoys me personally, as someone who has stood up and delivered bad news when it was most unwelcome, is to be accused of sugar-coating everything."

Lower down in the ranks there may have also been a sense that the paper just was plain wrong.

"I believe these experiences may be unique to Jeff Hutchings and Ram Myers," said Halifax Fisheries researcher Ken Frank, who pointed out that like the two Dalhousie researchers, he works with commercially important and politically sensitive groundfish.

Third, there may have been some personal animus in what went on. Prof. Myers is renowned among his colleagues for a brunt and brutal way of disagreeing with others. "I have never been one to hide my feelings," is how he puts it. And he and Dr. Doubleday have intellectually locked horns over several issues in the past.

Fourth, in a manner reminiscent of the Watergate burglars' bungled break-in, some alleged DFO efforts to quash critics seem singularly dumb and futile from their inception.

University of Washington fisheries scientist Ray Hilborn said his paper on the cost-effectiveness of the West Coast salmon recruitment program was one of those that Dr. Cook described as being subject to Fisheries influence. As well, after the paper's argument that all such programs had largely failed was published, he was denied future access to the Canadian salmon data base.

However, Prof. Hilborn readily acknowledges that had the Canadian Journal of Fisheries and Aquatic Research not accepted the paper, he simply would have published elsewhere. And when Canada cut him off, he was easily able to access the same data from

a U.S. computer site.

In another case, a sentence discussing research suggesting seals did not have a significant effect on the cod-stock collapse was pulled from a paper describing the proceedings of a fish-stock assessment meeting. However, Alan Sinclair, a Fisheries scientist in Moncton who was a co-author of the paper, said the sentence made it into a subsequent report; and more important, "I don't think taking out the sentence had that great of an effect."

Furthermore, it is the widespread impression of numerous people contacted for this article that blatant political interference is the exception and not the rule in the Fisheries Department.

"In general, DFO is a really good place to do research, but then something comes up and the feelers go up and down the line and suddenly anyone involved in those things will feel like they are in a completely different organization," Prof. Hilborn said.

And that is the final irony. While much of the news coverage has focused on he-said, she-said arguments over the responsibility for alleged past wrongs, the point of the original paper was not particularly confrontational. It simply asked: Was there a better way of organizing the relationships between science and bureaucratic systems that pass scientific information on to the politicians?

Several concrete suggestions were made, including establishing an arm's-length science organization and clearly and publicly presenting the range of scientific disagreement to both politicians and the general public.

The media have concentrated on specific wrongs, but these structural proposals will undoubtedly be the main issues of contention at today's meeting, which will take place at a conference on ocean-related topics, somewhat grandiloquently called the Summit of the Sea.

Fisheries Minister David Anderson said on Wednesday that he is not in favour of an arm's-length arrangement.

"I think it is best to have science in the department," he said, arguing that having in-house scientists, willing to undertake the often tedious work of stock data collection, is the best way to ensure there is an unbroken line in the transfer of scientific information to politicians.

One of the disputants already finds this finale to months of public debate amusing.

"It's sort of a T. S. Eliot thing. It began with a bang, and it is going to end with a whimper," Prof. Haedrich said.