

'Bureaucrats sabotage scientists'

Leading biologist calls for inquiry into department

BY ERIN ANDERSEN
The Ottawa Citizen

One of the country's leading biologists charges that the Department of Fisheries and Oceans deceived the Canadian public and contributed to the fall of the fisheries by intimidating its own scientists and ignoring outside research.

In an article published in the *Canadian Journal of Fisheries and Aquatic Sciences*, Jeff Hutchings and two other prominent scientists say the government department should be replaced with an independent group of researchers who can't be silenced by policy-makers.

"They're not being honest with the public," Mr. Hutchings said in an interview from his office at Dalhousie University in Halifax. "Information has been available for the department's consideration and they haven't used it. And in fact, they've biased things in other directions."

The article, which has enraged government officials, is a scathing condemnation of DFO bureaucracy. It describes a department that manufactured consensus among its staff, misused scientific studies, and deliberately ignored the warnings of independent scientists when their research conflicted with the agenda of the day.

"There is an urgent need," the article states, "for public scrutiny of the influence of senior-level bureaucrats in the management of Canada's natural resource."

The article is co-authored by Richard Haedrich of Newfoundland's Memorial University, and Carl Walters, who works at the Fisheries Institute at the University of British Columbia and is arguably one of the best fisheries biologists in the world. Mr. Haedrich and Mr. Walters are working

outside the country and could not be reached.

DFO officials adamantly deny the contents of the article, accusing the authors of selectively quoting government reports to "construct a storyline."

"The attacks are unjustified," said Bill Doubleday, the director-general of fisheries for DFO. "They are errors in interpretation."

Scott Parsons, the assistant deputy minister of science, said Mr. Hutchings' push for an independent body of scientists "sounds a little self-serving."

"Scientific debate within DFO is alive and well," he said, speaking on the phone from Copenhagen, where he is attending an international fisheries meeting.

Senior DFO bureaucrats are outraged that the journal refused to let the department respond to the article — and a supporting editorial — in the same edition. Although the journal has allowed it in the past, the authors turned down the request, saying they preferred to follow a common practice in which rebuttals and commentary appear in subsequent editions.

"Scientists know bloody well how it works," said Mr. Hutchings, who last year received an award naming him one of North America's leading young fisheries biologists. "It would have given special treatment to DFO."

The department doesn't see it that way. Deputy minister Bill Rowat has fired off an angry letter to Arthur Carty, president of the National Research Council, which publishes the journal.

"These are not scientific papers," he writes. "They are tabloid journalism. I am appalled at the unprofessional and unsubstantiated nature of their attacks on DFO, its scientist and its managers."

The 12-page article, which passed the journal's peer-review process, quotes scientific research papers, internal memos and statements by DFO scientists. It uses DFO's handling of the Atlantic cod fisheries and Pacific salmon as examples to support its argument.

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"This is not an attack on DFO science but how results are filtered up to the minister," said Mr. Hutchings.

"We have someone well up in bureaucracy in a position to alter scientific statements. Bureaucrats and scientists in that department have an overriding responsibility to defend the minister's position."

And according to the editorial in the current edition of *Fisheries Journal*, DFO's alleged censorship went beyond its own scientists and reports. The outgoing editor of the journal, David Cook, writes that on at least two occasions government officials tried to interfere with the journal's content. In one case, he says, officials tried to alter an unidentified article that may have "embarrassed the department."

Before publication, each article is reviewed by scientists in the field. Their comments decide whether the article is accepted. Their anonymity is strictly protected. In 1994, Mr. Cook writes, DFO tried to get the name of a scientist who anonymously reviewed a paper that "displeased" the department.

"It is my hope," the editor concludes, "that widespread awareness of these problems may tend to reduce the incidence of systemic abuse by placing the community on its guard."

Both Mr. Doubleday and Mr. Parsons deny any knowledge of attempts to censor the journal.

Reached at his Ottawa office, Mr. Cook refused to comment on his editorial or the controversy surrounding this month's journal.

Employed by the government, he said he has been told to keep quiet. The May issue is his last. He retires this fall, a decision made before he accepted the controversial article. The National Research Council took over publication of the journal from DFO a few years ago, and it wants a university professor to edit it rather than a bureaucrat.

"I've been told not to talk to the press," Mr. Cook said. "And I'm not go-

ing to jeopardize my family's income or my pension to contravene that order."

Word of the gag order and allegations of censorship prompt wry laughter among scientists.

"We know that DFO's going to try to put pressure on the journal," said Tony Pitcher, the director of UBC's Fisheries Institute. "So why do they do it? They won't succeed yet they look stupid for having done so."

Mr. Pitcher is quick to agree that DFO's problems extend deeper than a few failed attempts at censorship.

"This was going to be the best-managed resource in Canada," he said, "and there was a corporate belief that that was what they were doing. That belief persisted way beyond its validity and in the face of evidence to the contrary. It is not a healthy situation. It's about time it was completely revamped."

In his article, Mr. Hutchings maintains that DFO has twisted scientific research to support government statements and released biased, even false information to the public.

In the case of the Atlantic cod, Mr. Hutchings says that DFO accepted optimistic stock surveys, despite evidence that the research was wrong. The department, he writes, did not share data with other DFO researchers not directly involved in the assessment and ordered concerned scientists within the department to keep quiet.

Untrue, said Mr. Doubleday, maintaining that DFO scientists are encouraged to air their opinions freely during scientific meetings, and often in publications. Speaking to the media, he admitted, is a different story.

"When someone speaks for the department, they should reflect the view of the department," he said. "In scientific meetings they are unrestrained."

DFO's early cod stock assessments, he said, were backed by two panels of independent scientists who came to the same conclusions in the 1980s.

"We never claimed that stock assessments are absolute," he said. "We did the best with the info we had."

The article states that DFO deliberately removed information from government reports that blamed the cause of the cod collapse on overfishing, even though supporting research had been published and presented at assessment meetings. Mr. Hutchings said government documents — and DFO's web site today — suggest that seals and environmental factors were equally responsible.

At an international conference in St. John's this February, a group of scientists concluded there was no published evidence that seals were largely responsible for the decline in stocks. And environmental conditions such as low water temperatures were not unique to the early 1990s, Mr. Hutchings said.

"Very few scientists would disagree that overfishing was the dominating cause of the collapse of the cod fisheries," he said. "And some would say it was the only cause. But the public presentation differs greatly from the scientific research available."

Mr. Parsons said the article misrepresents the department's position. "We have made it quite clear that overfishing has been a major factor in the decline of the cod stocks," he said.

In July 1992, DFO announced a two-year moratorium on commercial fishing for northern cod. A support package was distributed to fishermen, and the wait began.

The journal article says there was no scientific basis for the two-year time frame, and the government's position did not account for the uncertainty of the prediction. "According to Mr. Hutchings, the time frame would have required the number of cod spawners to grow up to 200 per cent, when studies rate growth no higher than 19 per cent — a fact he teaches in his second-year ecology class. Based on those figures, the number of spawners would have had to grow at 10 times the normal rate to safely open commercial fishing in 24 months.

"Their analysis was not subject to normal scientific criteria," he said. "So

we've got all these fishing families waiting it out for two years. That comes down to the human tragedy of how science is selectively interpreted within management."

According to Mr. Hutchings, DFO did the same on the other side of the country. In B.C., the article makes the case that DFO manipulated scientific information — and sacrificed the Pacific salmon — to satisfy industry. But DFO argues that the article takes statements out of context by picking a few lines from more than 100,000 pages.

In the 1950s, the B.C. government allowed an aluminum company to build a dam on the Nechako River to power its smelter nearby. When the government and Alcan disagreed over water levels in the river in the 1980s, the company went to court. A settlement was eventually reached — at levels only slightly above what Alcan requested originally.

Quoting scientists who participated in a task force to study the issue, the article argues that DFO ignored the dissenting opinions of its own experts in setting an acceptable water level. The final technical report on the Nechako River, the article states, said little of differing opinions but for the one management preferred.

Without knowing all the positions, Mr. Hutchings said the public cannot judge the government's actions. "If you were able to talk to DFO scientists," he said, "you wouldn't hear the consensus published in these reports. You would find a very different scenario than the one the government presents."

The trouble is, Mr. Hutchings pointed out, you can't talk to DFO scientists. The article tells the story of one unnamed DFO biologist who was reprimanded for telling a newspaper the cod stocks had failed solely from overfishing.

That scientist was Ransom Myers, who left DFO two months ago to become chair of ocean studies at Dalhousie University.

"This is what could be documented," he said of the article. "In terms of the

amount of twisting of information and manipulation, the actual truth is mu worse. And they're still covering it up

For almost 12 years, Mr. Myers said he endured an environment that discouraged frank debate and tried to control the papers government scientists submitted for publication.

"There was enormous pressure to modify results," he said. "I was in a position of doing analysis that conflicted with what Ottawa wanted to believe. It was incredibly unpleasant."

Mr. Parsons said the DFO system does not leave room to manipulate science or restrict its scientists' publications.

And in the last few years, he said, the department has brought more outside scientists and fishermen into the process, using their knowledge to help develop stock assessments and recommend conservation measures. In 1994 the government created the independent Fisheries Resource Conservation Board to advise the minister whether Atlantic fishing areas should be opened and under what terms. A similar group is in the works for the West Coast.

"The Canadian process is more open and transparent than many in the world," he said. "You would have to search far and wide to find anything comparable."

That hasn't stopped Mr. Hutchings and other scientists from calling for detailed investigation into what went wrong at DFO.

"It is rather remiss," he said, "that we've had billions of dollars spent so 50,000 people out of work, communities ravaged and no public inquiry into the department."

He wants government to form a publicly funded independent group of scientists to study the fisheries and assess stocks, to openly discuss uncertainties and to report to the minister.

"We do not progress," he said, "if everyone agrees. It can only be society's best interest to have all the cards on the table."