

Common Ground

by Jack Julian

What the hell is going on in Nova Scotia's fishery? This question has been haunting me for the past couple of months like a half-remembered dream. The TV news shows people bristling inside occupied fisheries offices. School kids march in solidarity. But why? Two-sentence video explanations have left me grumpy and unsatisfied.

My snapping point came one morning as I was running to work, just a little late. Hollis Street was blocked by a snaky line of demonstrators. Emerging from the service entrance of the Maritime Centre, they were all holding on to a green nylon rope, kind of like senior kindergarten. Some of the protesting fishers carried signs slugging an entity called "the DFO."

I smiled politely and waited for them to pass. But they just kept on coming. Several minutes and several hundred demonstrators later, I was still there, wondering who all these fisher people were. And where did they get such a long rope? Jogging off to work, I decided to forget the whole spectacle. But it was too late. As of that morning, I was hooked.

I'M PROBABLY NOT THE IDEAL PERSON TO BE TELLING YOU about fish. I'm not a journalist, or a fisher, or a fisheries scientist. I'm not even a politician. My ancestors were farmers in Ontario, but since I grew up in a city, wild places are like foreign countries to me. Especially the ocean, which—north of Florida—is cold and lonely and forbidding. Childhood taught me that fish originate in the freezer, and come breaded with a jaunty wink from Captain Highliner.

Sadly, this story tastes nothing like fish sticks. Gritty, bitter, and tough, the ruin of the Nova Scotia groundfishery is spiked with human desperation and political maneuvering. It is a social and ecological tragedy only beginning to be felt.

THE JARGON

Fishing, I've discovered, is a highly complicated and technical matter. Learning the vocabulary taught me to think more clearly about its complexities. It's also essential to blurring your way in fisheries conversations. Here are the basics:

The fishery: There are 16,109 registered commercial fisheries in the Scotia/Fundy region. Their landings total around \$500 million per year. Approximately 8,500 people in the region work in plants that process this catch.

Inshore vs. Offshore: Nothing to do with what species you're fishing or how you catch 'em: it's all about where you fish. Inshore boats are smaller, they fish close to shore. Offshore boats are longer, deeper and have bigger engines. They can fish in rougher weather out as far as the 200 km limit.

What's a groundfish? Not surprisingly, groundfish spend most of their time down near the bottom of the ocean. The hands-down celebrity groundfish is definitely the cod, with honorable mentions going to haddock, halibut and pollock.

Groundfish stand in contrast to pelagic fish, which prefer to live higher up in the water. Herring, mackerel, salmon and swordfish are all pelagics.

What's the collapse of the groundfishery? Cod drew a lot of media attention when they almost disappeared. But groundfish stocks in general are dwindling.

Gear type: Gear is whatever the fisher uses to catch fish, with a big division between fixed and mobile gear. Fixed gear methods, like gill netting, are more traditional and labour intensive than mobile gear fishing. Fixed gear stays in one place, often using bait to attract its prey, primarily groundfish.

Hook and line gear is another type of fixed gear. Hooks and lines are employed in jigging (lines suspended from the boat) and long-lining, where lines covered in thousands of hooks are laid along the sea-bed and anchored in place. (The

green nylon rope at the protest was a long-line.)

Mobile gear takes a more pro-active approach. Draggers haul nets across the ocean floor, scooping up fish as they go. Some dragging gear is equipped with "rock-hoppers," rubber rollers that prevent snags on the rocky bottom. Draggers get down low, so they're good at scooping groundfish.

Mobile gear is relatively new to the fishery, introduced mostly from the 1960s to the '80s. Its ability to catch far more fish per boat, translating into more catch per fisher involved.

DFO: The Department of Fisheries and Oceans is an arm of Canada's civil service. It employs the economists, researchers, technicians, enforcement officers and public relations whose job it is to manage and protect Canada's waterways and fisheries resources. There are 3,200 people presently working for the DFO in the Maritime region. Its latest budget: \$115 million.

Fish Crime: There are many ways to dodge the DFO and its quotas. Dumping means throwing whole catches of fish back in the water after bringing them to the surface (which usually kills them). High-grading is a type of dumping where small or undesirable specimens are thrown over the side, so the quota is filled with the biggest fish of the priciest species. Then there's bribing enforcement officers, or simply landing entire loads at night. And the list goes on.

For more information: Consult the experts.

THE LIFE SCIENCES CENTRE IS AN ENORMOUS CEMENT bunker looming in the middle of the Dalhousie campus.

Dubbed "the LSD" by students, the structure's grim and airless interior has inspired legends of a suicidal architect. Dalhousie's biologists toil on however, apparently unaffected by their surroundings.

Jeff Hutchings is a fish ecologist at the university. He talks about the collapse of the groundfishery in terms that go beyond the loss of jobs or a food supply.

"We are talking about the greatest ecological disaster in the country, and people should view it as such. What does it say about the vulnerability of other things that we are managing or harvesting? That for me is the key issue, that it not just be viewed as a cod problem."

"This could happen to a freshwater species or to a terrestrial species. It could happen anywhere."

Thoughtful and even-voiced, Hutchings comments on the origins of the present situation. "There is no consensus among fisheries scientists regarding what caused the collapse of the fish stocks."

"I think those in universities tend to believe that over-fishing was the primary cause. There are certainly research scientists in the DFO who also think that, but there's a higher preponderance of fisheries scientists working for the government that favour a fairly strong role for ecosystem change of some kind. So there's not a consensus."

As for the effect of different types of fishing on the marine environment, there's been very little research. But he is sure some gear types are less likely than others to cause damage. "I think, clearly, the long line method is best from a conservation perspective. Hand- and long-lining would easily be the most conservation-minded gear."

Hutchings is concerned by the lack of research on the way fishing affects the fish, and believes fisheries research should be aimed at human activity. "Humans are an incredible predator, with multiple ways of catching our prey. What are the effects of that predator on this prey? Let's get a handle on that first, and then let's turn to other things."

IF YOU FORGET TO TURN AT THE BOTTOM OF SPRING GARDEN Road, you quickly run into the colossal facade of the Maritime Centre. Around back is where I ran into that protest, and high up on the 19th floor you can visit the super-secure digs of CSIS, Canada's spy agency. Tucked neatly in one floor below is the head office of the DFO, Maritime region.

As I am whisked into the sky in the glass-fronted elevator, I feel a sense of detachment growing as Halifax becomes very, very small. The DFO office itself exudes a cool managerial control, right down to the government-issue short-pile carpet.

When he arrives, I am ushered into the office of David Jennings, media relations officer for the Maritimes. Mr. Jennings is tall, wears a grey suit and studious round glasses, and has the relaxed curly hair of a Quebecois folk singer. It is his unenviable task to explain to me what, exactly, is going on.

"We are in a huge state of transition and, of course, crisis," Jennings informs me that the DFO is under the deficit gun. To start, DFO's Maritime staff will be cut back from 3,200 to 2,000 over the next four years.

He says beneath the crisp office exterior, strain is being felt. A recent merger with the coast guard was "pretty stressful." As budget famine loomed, there was "fighting over who got the photocopier, the fax machine, who gets the secretary."

With such clerical shortages, DFO is now bustling as the remaining workers scramble to keep up. Jennings smiles ruefully and gestures at the two-foot pile of papers on his desk awaiting his attention. "It's a nice view from up here, but I

don't get much time to enjoy it."

Aside from office mayhem, Jennings is quick to point out that by the numbers, Nova Scotia's fishery is doing better than ever. "Our landings are about the highest we've ever had in terms of value. A lot of this has to do with diversification." There's a good market for 'exotic' species like eel and surf clam in Japan, and lobster in Europe.

But when it comes to the groundfishery, the DFO is still working on that. The province-wide demonstrations and occupations of DFO offices happened when a new management policy was introduced last winter. The details of that policy are still being hammered out. One element of the plan is to shift the costs of the DFO's services over to the fishers by charging more for a fishing license.

"License fees are going up to reflect just a bit the value of the fishery these people have access to," says Jennings. "Some guys are making millions on a \$30 license. The average gross for a lobster fishing boat is \$110,000. This new licensing fee of \$1,800 would represent a small percent of that gross."

But raising fees—a 6,000% hike in some cases—is only the first step. A more significant and controversial component of DFO's plan is a direct response to the weakness of groundfish stocks. The department has decided that it's a problem of too many fishers chasing too few fish. Things just need thinning out. The question is: who gets the axe?

"We are moving towards a new 'core' fishery. We need to bring the fishery down to sustainable, supportable levels. A core fisherman will be someone who's really an important part of the industry."

The real problem, according to Jennings, lies with a certain kind of fisher. "Most of these people who are fishermen aren't really fishermen. They're people who fish long enough to get their stamps, and basically they're people who are unemployed almost all year. If we took away the unemployment, they'd have to find something else to do."

Though a civil servant himself, Jennings takes a dim view of reliance on government. "Every time somebody falls afoot of their livelihood in this country it's felt the government's got

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to pay for it. 'My house's been hit by a tornado, the government's got to pay for it. My job's disappeared, the government's got to get me a new one.'

As part of the new hands-off attitude, Jennings informs me the DFO has put the disputed policy into the hands of the fishers. "We've said, 'you guys go back to the table, work it out among yourselves, and once we've approved it, go fishing by your own plan.'"

However, Jennings is not optimistic about the fishers' ability to cooperate. "It's enough if they can find some communality with others that have the same size boats living in the same area. But when they get to people with bigger boats or with different kind of gear, they all hate each other."

NOVA SCOTIA'S FISHERS DO NOT HAVE A collective voice representing their concerns to the DFO. Unlike postal workers (Canadian Union of Postal Workers) or nurses (Nova Scotia Nurses Union), there is no union for the Inshore Region Aquacultural Technicians/ Employees (IRATE). Instead, there are dozens of tiny organizations localized in fishing communities province-wide.

To meet with the South West Nova Fisherman's Rights Association, I drive three hours from Halifax to Clark's Harbour. Clark's Harbour is on Cape Sable Island, just off the south shore between Barrington Passage and Yarmouth. Ron Newall is head of the SWNFRA, representing a group of hand- and long-liners who live in the area, and my introduction from him is brief: "You said you wanted to talk to protesters. Here are some for you." Shaking their hands, I notice they could probably crack open golf balls like peanuts. These men had peacefully occupied the Barrington Passage DFO office, sparking a rash of similar actions across the province and drawing support from across the country.

Newall's kitchen is thick with cigarette smoke and debate about

new groundfish quotas is in full force: the democracy of the process initiated by the DFO is in question. Fred Sears attended the negotiations in Halifax that arose as a result of the occupations. "In Halifax, if 25 associations said yes, and one didn't want it, the DFO would say they can't pass it because it ain't full consensus. But I hear it was 50-50 with these quotas, and now it's passed."

The new quotas would be based upon how much fish was caught in previous years. Sears points out that this creates a system where yesterday's cheats will prosper. "In the past, people had licenses for ten nets but were fishing 50 or 60. Their catch history is 70% illegal, and now they're going to take them fish from us percentage-wise!"

Similarly, hook and line fishers are threatened because their gear is more selective. They've never caught massive amounts of fish, so the draggers will get more of the quotas. "This don't leave nothing for the fellow that's done the most conservative fish-

ing," says Sears. "He's gone."

Tom Hatfield, a long-liner, feels the DFO has got it all backwards. "It's the small ones they say are the problem. But it's not us that's the problem. They're dragging 300 days a year, day and night.

"Anyone with common sense will tell you that everything's got an ecosystem, like in the oceans, and it all starts from the bottom. If you destroy your bottom, you've got to be hurting something."

Sears agrees. He sees the fishery being concentrated in the name of money rather than conservation. "You've got a natural resource out there worth millions. So people that's got millions of dollars want it."

As the new quotas stand, the attrition rate among small operators will be high. "If we go with catch history, I see us losing ten percent of us a year for four or five years," Sears says. "What'll happen to Clark's Harbour? A ghost town."

THAT NIGHT, RON NEWALL SITS ALONE IN the kitchen. He's been on the phone solidly since 8am, talking to the media and association members. The human cost of this issue is all too familiar. "There's people been here crying because they're losing everything."

In fact, many in Clark's Harbour think violence is just barely under the surface. A stress management team has been sent to Lockport to help fishers and their families cope with the pressure. And Newall sees the frustrations rising, though he's committed to keeping protests peaceful. "When it comes to violence, I'm done. I'm finished. They'll have to find someone else to lead them."

But with so many people under the same tension, finding a new leader wouldn't likely be hard. Sears says the new quota system is even pitting neighbours against each other. "I've got a fairly good catch history. Maybe if I took my history, me and my son could get half a year's work.

"But if I do, I'll put a

couple of these fellows out of work, and out of their houses eventually. If you've worked all your life, and just took the minimum amount of fish out of the ocean, and you've got a car and a home and a couple of kids, and you see that car go up the road, or your home's being taken, you're gonna snap.

"Whoever it is, he ain't gonna care who he takes down with him."

WHEN I LEAVE TOWN THE NEXT MORNING, I stop at the wharf. Scores of boats sit idle, waiting for the terms of this year's fishery to be set. Terms that will have an impact far beyond Clark's Harbour.

"We're talking about coastal communities all around Nova Scotia," cautions Fred Sears. "There's a chain reaction.

"How many fishermen put how many millions of dollars into Halifax every year? But now we're going to be taking. Because some of us are coming to Halifax after your job. And we'll work cheaper than you." ▀

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