

A Perspective on Department of Fisheries and Oceans Science (Response to a Canadian Press story June 21)

By Dr. .L. S. Parsons

A Canadian Press story of June 21 referred to an article in the May edition of the Canadian Journal of Fisheries and Aquatic Sciences (CJFAS) that contains numerous false statements and allegations concerning the Department of Fisheries and Oceans (DFO). The CJFAS article was authored by Hutchings, Walters and Haedrich.

The story quotes Hutchings as saying that DFO deceived the Canadian public and contributed to the fall of the fisheries by intimidating its own scientists and ignoring outside research. The CP story states that the article in CJFAS 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.

All of these statements are false and they are not supported by the incidents cited in the Journal article.

DFO was denied an opportunity to respond to these allegations in the same issue of the Journal in which they appear. Why did these authors choose to deny the institution and individuals being attacked a timely and fair opportunity to respond? In September 1996, many months before DFO became aware of the existence of this article, the authors were asked by the CJFAS whether they would agree to provide an advance copy to DFO in order to provide an opportunity to respond. The authors refused.

DFO's request was consistent with the Journal's common practice. We note, for example, that the preceding edition of CJFAS provided for an article and three separate responses to appear simultaneously. While the aforementioned authors claim a commitment to open scientific debate, their actions speak otherwise. DFO has been forced to wait one or two months to respond, allowing these falsehoods to be disseminated unchallenged.

DFO does not ignore outside research and the warnings of independent scientists. The independent reports by Dr. Lee Alverson (Task Group on the Newfoundland Inshore Fishery) in 1987 and Dr. Leslie Harris (Independent Review of the State of the Northern Cod Stock) in 1989-90 were the basis for the management of the fishery in subsequent years.

DFO does not intimidate its own scientists. The Journal article cites the written reprimand given to Ransom Myers in 1995 as an example of intimidation. This is rubbish. While he was with the Department, Myers published extensively, without restriction, in journals of his choice. He also attended numerous international meetings, at government expense, where he presented his views and the results of his research. He was promoted three times in the Research Scientist Category while at DFO, the most recent occurring in 1996, after the written reprimand and just before he left DFO for a position at Dalhousie.

DFO does not "manufacture" consensus among its scientists. For most Atlantic and Pacific fish stocks over the last several years, DFO has made substantial changes to the stock assessment process. Fishers and independent scientists participate in stock assessment meetings when information and analyses are

being presented and before conclusions about stock status are formulated. The resulting stock status reports are widely circulated and freely available from DFO. The stock status reports and abstracts of supporting research documents are accessible via the Internet or by contact with the authors.

Scientific debate and disagreement are facts of life. Messrs. Hutchings and Myers should not be surprised that their views are not always endorsed by their peers.

DFO has an open, transparent and rigorous stock assessment process that is among the best in the world. The approach to formulating conservation recommendations is leading edge.

On the Atlantic coast, DFO stock assessments are viewed by an independent, arms-length body, the Fisheries Resource Conservation Council (FRCC), which includes reputable scientists. The FRCC, after receiving the stock status reports, holds public hearings where the public, ranging from fishers to independent scientists, is invited to appear. After carefully considering the evidence, the FRCC makes conservation recommendations to the Minister, which are made available to the public at the same time.

A similar Council is now being developed for the Pacific coast, in collaboration with the province of British Columbia.

As part of the government's Science and Technology Strategy, DFO like other federal government departments has established a Science Advisory Council whose membership includes university scientists as well as client representatives. This Council will provide advice on DFO science priorities, program directions and processes.

Hutchings, Walters and Haedrich are locked in a time warp, citing and distorting incidents from the 1980s to support their agenda. Most of their so-called information has been in the public domain since the 1980s. As an example, the information concerning northern cod was available to independent panels, led on different occasions, by Dr. Lee Alverson and Dr. Leslie Harris. In both instances, these Panels reached essentially the same conclusions regarding stock status as had been earlier advanced by DFO scientists.

Hutchings, Walters and Haedrich have chosen to use the Canadian Journal of Fisheries and Aquatic Sciences as a platform from which to launch an unprofessional and unsubstantiated attack upon DFO, its scientists and its managers. In so doing, they have maligned the reputations of hundreds of dedicated, hard-working scientists and managers across the country, including many of the world's leading scientists.

Their article is not a scientific paper. It is science fiction. It is based on innuendo and misrepresentation which have no place in a scientific journal.

In keeping with its open and transparent process, DFO welcomes scientific debate. To this end, DFO challenges the authors of the Journal article and the former Journal editor to participate in a public forum addressing the management of marine science to be held this summer.