

Scientists stand firm on criticism of Fisheries

BY CHARLES ENMAN

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When three biologists published a critique this past summer of the federal Fisheries Department's use of science, they hardly suspected the firestorm of controversy they were about to set off.

Yesterday, those biologists testified on Parliament Hill before the Commons fisheries committee.

Jeffrey Hutchings, Carl Walters and Richard Haedrich published an article in the June issue of the *Canadian Journal of Fishery and Aquatic Science*. They wrote that science was misused and distorted by bureaucrats in the Department of Fisheries and Oceans. The results, they wrote, have been calamitous, including the collapse of cod stocks off the Atlantic coast.

The committee has taken up the issue, partly inspired by the chorus of denunciations of DFO by scientists who spoke out in the aftermath of the article's publication.

In their presentations, Mr. Hutchings, Mr. Walters and Mr. Haedrich held true to their beliefs.

Mr. Hutchings, a professor of biology at Dalhousie University, said bureaucrats and ministers who have to make quick decisions often ignore the uncertainties and differences of opinion within science. There is, for example, great uncertainty in estimates of the size of a given fish stock — an uncertainty that must be clearly acknowledged, he said, if quotas are to err on the side of caution. These uncertainties are seldom specified once a minister has announced a quota.

"Why?" Mr. Hutchings asked. "Because whenever a minister of the Crown renders a decision, employees cannot be seen to embarrass the minister."

A scientist who identifies the biological risks associated with a decision is seen as embarrassing the minister, something that is "simply not allowed," Mr. Hutchings said. His solution is the creation of a fisheries resource management committee that would report the risks associated with decisions on managing fish stocks.

The committee — including scientists from DFO, from universities, and from international government laboratories — would have full access to DFO data. The committee's reports would be communicated to the public by an independent body — perhaps the auditor general. Mr. Hutchings also suggested that the government give more money to fisheries research in universities. As well, staff should be moved from Ottawa to the regions to better focus on local fisheries issues.

Mr. Walters, a professor of fisheries and zoology at the University of British Columbia, agreed with Mr. Hutchings about the risks for scientists who criticize their bureaucratic masters.

"There is an enormous potential career loss for those who speak out," he said. "You may be called a radical or a maverick, and your career advancement may be affected."