

ON SHARKS, MEN, AND QUOTAS

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A complaint came loud on the 'Fishfolk' Internet network: after several years of resisting administrative pressure the Australian southern shark fishery was put under ITQ-management. According to the fishermen, the administration took this step despite protests from fishing communities, and opposition of the industry, scientists, several environmentalist organizations, and state fisheries managers and fisheries officers.

The southern shark gillnetting fishery has been supported by 60 full-time gillnetters and 60 part-time boats none exceeding 20-m oal, with total annual landings less than 2,500MT of school and gummy sharks (*Galeorhinus galeus* - 20% and *Mustelus antarcticus* 80%, respectively). As a small-scale fishery, which operates from many small harbours, it does not belong to those big league fisheries that are normally subject to ITQ management or to attempts at ITQ management. So, what brought the authorities to impose the ITQ system on this fishery, why, and what for? I'm inviting the AFMA to provide this column with answers (*), for I've got none.

According to the shark industry's vocal speakers, Michael Hobson, a skipper of a shark gillnetter fishing out of Port Albert, Victoria, and Bob McDonald a naturalist and a former deckhand with the shark fleet, and now a researcher for the Southern Shark Gillnet Fishermen's Association (SSGFA), in Australia, Victoria, this management step is a result of inadequate science that borders on ignorance of the fishery ecosystem in question. An additional allegation is that the administration has been dead set to introduce ITQs by hook or by crook whether or not they fit the case, and hence not prepared to consider facts and listen to opinions coming from the industry.

The shark fishermen's complaints are many. One of their most serious allegations is that they were not listened to. Worse, their opinion was slighted and disregarded. The fishermen members on the management board were selected by the administration out of the few (5%) personally interested in ITQs, because they wanted to sell out and leave the industry. Scientific evidence contrary to the ITQ/TAC approach was disregarded. Quotas were allocated unreasonably to 150 boats, on the basis of old pre-logbook data, while presently only 60 are in operation. The resulting quotas are too small to pay a boat-owner's way, making fishing financially infeasible.

In addition, the very quota allocation process went astray because it was based on catch history from as long as seven years ago. This is a long time in intensely physical fisheries, say the fishermen. The wear and tear of people working on

small boats, in rough seas, up to 72 hours non stop and flat out when fish are found, is fast. There is a continuous changeover of people in the fishery, and 7 years is a lot.

On the technical-scientific side, the industry speakers insist that the TAC/ITQ system doesn't fit a mixed fishery with two shark species, which are subject to significant availability/vulnerability fluctuations that are caused by environmental variations. Such fluctuations often don't express the state of stocks, especially highly mobile ones, as the southern sharks are. All the more that the school shark stock is common with the several times larger, high-quota NZ fishery. The fishermen say that their fish come and go on long and mostly unpredictable cycles, while administration's scientists identified a non-existing overfishing problem,.

"Late last year and early this year - wrote Skipper Hobson - barracouta is back big time; after having been commercially absent for more than 20 years the schools are boiling again. Southern bluefin tuna, almost absent from Bass Strait for more than five years is schooling here again. School sharks reappeared and possibly big time, just less than 60 days after the quota system designed to cap their catch had been introduced. They are turning up everywhere, in amateur catches on beaches, in the bays and inlets, and even on gummy shark grounds. For the first time ever fleets are steaming away from fish because of insufficient quota. Amateurs are catching school shark off the beaches for the first time in ten years, and leasing a school-shark quota is all but impossible". So, where is the management's overfishing"?

School sharks give birth to live-born pups in coastal waters. The pups live, feed and grow in certain protected waters. Some of such habitats have been degraded or otherwise affected by human activities.

"The main problem is not overfishing - writes Bob McDonald - but rather anthropogenic nursing-ground destruction of which SSGFA's people have taken care in their own way, with their own money and initiative, and self-proclaimed large no-take zone. We have begun a trial restoration of formerly reclaimed school shark nursery habitat in a bay shared by three shark-fishing ports. We are paying farmers by contract, per hectare/year, to inundate such coastal wetlands at a price they could expect to make from cattle grazing on them. We will also be paying to for further habitat protection on the same basis".

The southern shark fishermen have demonstrated an outstanding understanding of their fishery ecosystem and a remarkable initiative and capacity for self-management. All this was not good enough for official management, who force-fed the ITQs down the sharkmen's throats.

"Under our management, we have a no-go zone in our fishery over 20,000 sq.km in the coastal inshore nursery areas, which all shark fishermen abide by, and no enforcement problems at all. With a management regime that most fishermen resist, there's going to be

high grading, and lesser-fish dumping just to survive the current fishing season. By confronting fishermen head on no management gets compliance".

No doubt, SSGFA is able to formulate a shark management scheme and set it forth as a realistic alternative to the ITQ/TAC system. It may undertake not to exceed the present catch levels, and to divide such self-imposed TAC among the active fishermen, on a voluntary basis and under a closed access. After, say, 5-6 years of such management, accompanied by increased research and monitoring efforts, the continuation or change of this strategy could be discussed and decided on, that time based on better data and information, and a fairer dialogue.

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