

## *Fishing people*

### **SMALL-SCALE FISHERMEN - AN ENDANGERED SPECIES?**

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The little people of the sea  
Have sent an answer back to me  
The little people's answer was  
We cannot stand it, Sir, because.  
*Paraphrased after Lewis Carrol*

Elsewhere, voiced some of the anxieties of artisanal fisherfolk in developing countries, facing the increasing competition on the part of industrial and other larger-scale fishing fleets, and the ensuing conflict. But, this simmering conflict is by no means limited to Africa and Asia. Also in the industrialized North, various groups of small-scale, inshore, big-city and coastal-communities-based fishermen who operate their own, family, or partnership-owned small fishing vessels become increasingly vocal. With the "global village" concept extending to the world's fisheries and their management, they have started meeting and talking internationally.

An initiative for an "Alliance of Coastal Fishermen and Coastal Communities in the N.Atlantic" covering countries surrounding that part of the ocean, proposes as objectives: "(i) To ensure the priority rights of coastal fishermen for utilization of their traditional fishing grounds for their livelihood; (ii) To define the rights of coastal communities in utilizing fishing grounds in order to safeguard their interests through continued traditional inshore fisheries". This initiative is symptomatic of the anxieties perceived in fishing communities throughout the area, from New England, Nova Scotia and Newfoundland in the West, through Greenland, Iceland, and Norway in the North and the Faroes, Shetlands and the Hybrides, in the East.

Here and there, fisherfolk let out steam, as it happened when British small-boat owners assembled to protest against the costs and technical feasibility of safety-at-sea measures proposed by a state agency. If indeed these were the costs that broke the camel's back, it appears that the British small-scale fishermen are not too well off nowadays.

And not only they. Fisherfolk, from Tasmania down yonder to British Columbia and Alaska, up there, feel themselves increasingly displaced from their traditional fisheries by big private and corporate fleets owners.

In Third-World fisheries the struggle is over the by-and-large illicit, sometimes government-allowed, but practically free access to the traditional artisanal fishing grounds by industrial fleets. In the West, small-scale fishermen feel themselves being continually nudged off their former domains by corporate interests riding piggy-back on state-enacted and enforced fishery management strategies.

Much of the protests have been coming from North America's northwest salmon fisheries. One outcry, accompanied by sit-ins and demonstrations was spurred by the notorious 1996 "Mifflin Plan" of licensing the salmon fishery in a manner that favoured big corporations, because most small-boat owners were unable to invest up to half-a-million dollars in licences needed to keep fishing the coast under the new regime. British Columbia's salmon fishermen accused the government, in the words of Michael Moore of B.C's Coastal Communities Network, of "giving the resource to a few millionaires and strip the wealth out of the coastal communities". They were supported by Chris Newton, a former Canadian and FAO fishery officer, who told the press: "What Mifflin (Canada's Fisheries Minister) is doing is moving everything towards dividends and profits and away from fishing communities, and that's what's been killing fisheries all over the world". Newton warned of a resulting increase in capital investment in fishing capacity "and even greater pressure on the salmon stocks...".

Similar complaints were voiced by fishworkers from other areas during the 1997 St.John's Conference of the Harvesters in the North Atlantic Fisheries. Hanne Nilssen of Norway told about the plight of coastal communities in Norway caused by quota management, and Arfin Ellingsen spoke of making the public understanding that fishing communities are not a burden on the society. Arthur Bogasson, of Iceland's National Association of Small Boat Owners blamed the highly publicized ITQ (individual transferrable quotas) management system and corporate quota buyers for decimating Iceland inshore fleet of small boats, while, at the same time the fishing capacity of large trawlers in terms of total horsepower more than doubled.

But the Icelandic small-scale fishermen, who felt the danger to their coastal communities and their culture, organized and fought back, gradually gaining public support. They appealed to common sense, pointing out that "the small-boat sector, compared to trawlers, creates 3 times as many jobs for the same tonnage of cod and uses 5 times less oil per caught tonne of fish". Also: "a freezer trawler with 30 people costs \$30M, while 30 small boats with one man on board cost \$8.4M". Apparently, the Icelandic fisherfolk managed to exert considerable political pressure, for their share in TAC was increased considerably, while the struggle against the ITQ system continued.

During the 1970s, Newfoundland's inshore fishermen were asking for protection from foreign offshore fleets - said Bill Broderick, himself a local inshore fisherman - but what Canada did in 1977 was to replace those fleets with its own corporate-owned vessels. Again the inshoremen were first to warn that there's something wrong with the cod stocks, but the official science and the government wouldn't listen till it was too late and the big trawlers came back from the banks with empty nets, (see this Column in Sept., 1998 issue). Then came the cod moratorium which shook and upset traditional fishing communities throughout the area.

Rory McLellan of the Prince Edward Island Fishermen's Association divided the fisheries into artisanal fishery in coastal communities, and the ocean-sucking industrialized corporate fishery which maximizes profits and gets out of town". Prof.Parcival Copes, an erstwhile inshore fisherman and a fishery economist of world reneome is a critic of the attitude "to do away with perfectly viable communities using a system that puts all

the power in the hands of those with finances to buy up quotas and concentrate them where it suits them best". He rejects the notion that the ITQ system itself guards stocks from overfishing.

According to Noel Harper, a former abalone fisherman, the Tasmanian abalone fishery is an example of concentration of ownership out of fishermen's hands. At first, all quotas have been owned by fishermen, now, over 12 years less than half is owned by them and the percentage is decreasing each year. "The problem that arose in the Tasmanian situation was that the value of the ITQs became so great that in reality no ordinary working fisher could enter the fishery" - elucidated Marc Wilson of the Australian Maritime College on the Internet Fishfolk list.

And the trend seems to continue. Only this March, a Canadian company CANFISCO bought the assets of BC Packers, including processing plants, from another company, George Weston Ltd., and now owns 25% of the vessels and licences of the BC seining fleet. Evidently, when a big company "over-stretches" and goes bankrupt, there's another one lying in wait to add spoils to its own assets.

Fishery management is not only about the quantity of fish to be extracted or effort to be exerted. It determines, admittedly or not, what sectors and how many people are going to benefit from the fishery, altogether a political issue. If based on free-market philosophy (ITQ-system does) and puts a common resource on the market, it'll eventually end up "concentrated" in the hands of a few. Well-wishing official and legal mitigating means eventually fail. Marc Wilson, drawing on his experience as a fisheries administrator thinks that it is almost impossible to ensure that state's social/industry objectives are met. There are always either very clever and sophisticated or crude ways of effectively changing the "true" ownership of ITQs – especially where very large values and profits are attached to them.

Small-scale ITQs buyers who relied mostly on borrowings to participate in a fishery would be effectively in slavery to the financiers. Some had been even before the ITQs. Allocation of traditional coastal resources to however economically efficient big companies controlled fleet is usually explained away by the need to protect a common resource. In fact, it may serve badly not only the coastal communities but also the society at large. The social price in terms of unwanted urbanization, joblessness, more welfare clients, crime, and vice, may exceed any residual direct and indirect benefits coming from the big business. Such marginalisation comes, for example, where vertically integrated big companies service their vessels and land catches in big-city harbours side-stepping the coastal communities.

Blaming small-scale fisherfolk for overfishing stocks, especially of finfish, is in my view a sham, because their fishery has inherent self-regulating and other, traditional mechanisms, preventing critical over-exploitation. There're no such mechanisms among large-scale fleets. With their strong financing backing they won't stop fishing even when catch rates decrease. They may fish out what's there, and move elsewhere. Still, these are the local fishermen who usually are blamed. As the old English rhyme says:

They hang the man and flog the woman  
That steal the goose from off the common,  
But let the greater villain loose  
That steals the common from the goose.