

Figuring out the Sustainability of the Fish Industry:

Literally a Life and Death Proposition

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Although it may appear I'm in the restaurant business, selling fish, I'm actually in the fish business, operating restaurants. The difference, I believe, is significant.

In the former scenario, it might be construed that I'm simply interested in short-term supply issues, and that my interest in sustainability is somewhat myopic. However, because I truly view my business from the latter perspective of "being in the fish business," my interest is not too dissimilar from the conservationists.

My family entered the fish business over 50 years ago, when my father opened a retail market in Inman Square, Cambridge. So I literally grew up in the fish business. And from that early time till today, my family's focus has been to source the finest seafood product, primarily from North Atlantic waters, and to make that resource available to the public.

I *have* to be a conservationist when it comes to the seafood industry, since I want my family business to continue for future generations. In order for that to happen, there must be bonafide sustainability. From New Bedford to Gloucester, every fisherman I've met who has fished for more than one generation feels the same way I do.

Over the years, I've come in contact with dozens of intelligent well meaning people from all corners of the marine industry -- scientists, environmentalists and, of course, fishermen. Unfortunately, although their goal of sustainability tends to be universal, their means of pursuing that goal vary greatly. Each faction seems to speak a different language. My observation is that the group which screams the loudest captures more of the government's attention. It's a classic case of winning by most effectively lobbying a particular viewpoint.

Let's try looking at this purely objectively. On one hand, we have a cohesive team of environmentalists -- many of whom are lawyers -- heavily financed by charitable trusts. On the other hand, we have a group of fiercely independent risk-taking fishermen who are hell-bent on preserving their livelihood. These men have little or no time to spend onshore, forming coalitions and alliances and raising funds, given the ever-tightening regulatory net around their source of money. Now which group is most severely handicapped in getting its position realized? The fishermen, of course. The dearth of attention focused on their day-to-day economic survival is the plight facing the North Atlantic fishermen.

If this were a political race between two opponents, we'd say "Hey, the candidate who is most effective in getting his point across deserves to win." This particular battle, however, should not be construed as political. Far more is at stake here. Yes, it is in everyone's interest to work towards sustainability of the stocks. But in doing so, it

should not be mutually exclusive of providing for those who earn a livelihood from the sea. Latest statistics indicate that every job on a fishing boat represents 6.5 jobs on land. Those numbers cannot be ignored in this debate. This entire showdown should be more broadly recast as “sustainability of the marine industry.”

When Dr. William Hogarth, National Director of the National Marine Fisheries Service, was in Gloucester last summer, he acknowledged being stymied by the inadequate scientific data available to him in assessing the stocks. The data, he said, was 2 ½ to 3 years old. Couple that weakness with the widely divergent anecdotal reports of the fisherman. The picture you end up with suffers from critical gaps, which make final assessments mere guesswork at best.

Consider the moratorium imposed a few years back on sea scallops harvested off George’s Bank. Scientific data indicated the sea scallops in that area would be slow to regenerate, thus the restriction on catches. But while the moratorium was in effect, the fishermen kept reporting a different story. Not only were the scallops back, the men said, but in such abundance that the scallop shells were scraping the bottoms of their boats! In that particular incident, hundreds of thousands of pounds of sea scallops actually went to waste, bound up by misapplied restrictions, because the so-called scientific assessments were inaccurate.

None of the stakeholders involved in this contest can afford to make decisions based on such inaccurate assessments. Nor is the solution to simply rely on anecdotal reports. What is needed is hard, proven, irrefutable data collected on a timely basis and accessing all available resources.

I propose a two step approach:

First, I suggest we augment funding to improve the timeliness of the data collection process. This may require putting more scientific equipment on boats, and it may require increasing the number of human observers charged with compiling real-time data.

Second, I recommend convening an ongoing symposium of all stakeholders in the discussion, from institutions such as the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institute and the Conservation Law Foundation to a contingent of the commercial fishermen themselves. The net result could be a series of validated ‘white papers’ which would serve to keep various government agencies updated and to provide critical input for future decision-making vis-à-vis stock assessments.

One factor which I believe has been wrongly ignored during these debates is the bottom-line healthfulness of seafood. As a member of the Harvard School of Public Health’s Nutrition Roundtable, I work closely with Dr. Walter Willet, arguably America’s foremost authority on health and nutrition. In that capacity, I can tell you unequivocally that we, as a society, need to keep fish on our tables.

Seafood is among the healthiest of all protein, and its importance in everyday diets cannot be undervalued. The American Heart Association has stated that consumers who enjoy a diet rich in seafood show a significantly lower incidence of heart disease and stroke. The Omega-3 fish oils found in seafood lower the 'bad cholesterol' LDL which often contributes to a dangerous buildup of plaque in coronary arteries, increasing the risk of heart disease. A diet rich in seafood and low in red meat also decreases one's risk of colorectal and prostate cancer.

So, as I see it, readily available seafood is a critical weapon in our national quest to improve our health. In the final analysis, figuring out how to keep fish stocks sustainable and plentiful is literally a "life and death" proposition for the American public. To that end, we need a reasoned, real-life, practical way to regulate commercial fishing. The policy must not only allow the replenishment of the stocks but also permit fishermen sufficient flexibility to maintain their traditional livelihoods. If we can achieve this delicate balance, it is the American public who will be the major beneficiary. This challenge is critically important not just for the distant future, but for today. *Right now* careers are being altered, fleets are being downsized, and lifelong fishermen are abandoning their struggle to remain viable. We must address these personal stories of economic security as vigorously as we monitor scientific progress of fish sustainability.