



CANADIAN COMMERCIAL FISHING: *A Privilege or a Right?*

The commercial fishing industry must define evidence-based best practices and agree on performance benchmarks that define standards of excellence if it is to be recognized as a profession.

BY TIM LYNCH

At the Fourth General Assembly of the Canadian Council of Professional Fish Harvesters (CCPFH) in Vancouver in February, participants explored the theme “A Modern Fishery for a New Generation” through two busy days of breakout sessions. After the first day’s workshops, which looked at rising costs, support of new entrants, retiring fish harvesters and owner/operator fleets, as well as examining health, safety and human resources planning, the conference launched its second day with a keynote speech from Tom Rideout, the Newfoundland/Labrador Minister of Fisheries and Agriculture. Participants learned that Newfoundland fishermen are empowered to collectively decide if a politician gets elected, making them a significant political force in the province. BC fishers should be so lucky.

Rick Williams of Praxis Research then launched a panel discussion on “Sustaining the Independent Fishery for a New Generation” with an informative account of the Council’s May 2005 report, *Setting A New Course, Phase II Human Resources Sector Study for the Fish Harvesting Industry in Canada*. Helping to shed light on where mistakes have been made in formulating a national fish policy in Canada, the report provides detailed accounting of the urgent need for change to ensure credible sustainability of the fishing industry for the next generation. Ian Matheson, Director of Rural Policy & Strategic Development with the Ministry of Agriculture and Agri-food, provided an inspiring account of how fishing communities could benefit by availing themselves of the partnership building and facilitation tools developed by his ministry. In addition, Rosemary Ommer from the University of Victoria discussed the findings of research conducted at her university around coastal communities and the stress they are experiencing in adjusting to the demise of the fishing industry on the West Coast. Eric Tamm of Ecotrust Canada then exposed the way urban corporate fishing interests threaten

coastal communities. According to Tamm, “those initially granted quotas by the government earn windfall profits because the public resource is given to them free.” Tamm called for balance in policies affecting fishing communities around all socio-geopolitical parameters, and highlighted the impacting of current trends on coastal communities that lead to the downfall of traditional lifestyles.

Participants also listened to a fisherman from France talk about the pitfalls, challenges, obstacles and opportunities of managing fishing policies within the European Economic Union. Pierre-Georges Dachicourt of the Comité des pêches maritimes des élevages marine France, the only experienced fisherman on the panel, explained the challenges around finding common understanding in the development of sustainable fishery policies among France, Belgium, Britain, Ireland, etc. within the EU market model and set against a highly competitive global environment.

Mixed in with the familiar themes surrounding the breakdown of coastal communities, such as the migration of power to urban settings, protecting owner-operator legacies, the failure of past government policies and criticism of DFO, was a call for recognition of commercial fishing as a knowledge-based industry that employs professionals and highly qualified practitioners. Clearly the purpose of CCPFH is to promote professional standards within the commercial fishing industry and gain respect within Canadian society for the knowledge and risks required to harvest a highly valued food source.

In addressing the traditional and often problematic image of the “old salt” fisherman, which still lingers, creating a hazy view of commercial fishing in the 21st century, Peter Noël, Crabliens Du Nord-Est Inc. of New Brunswick said, “Canadians need to realize that being a commercial fisher in 2006 requires the acquisition of considerable knowledge and understanding about complex technical and business matters

CCPFH is a Human Resource and Development Canada (HRDC) Sector Council for the fishing industry, representing commercial fishing stakeholders from all regions of the country. CCPFH's vision and mandate is "Professional fish harvesters (captains and crew) living in stable coastal communities will remain the predominant sector in the Canadian fishing industry."

as well as an appreciation of how people need to be managed in difficult situations." Acknowledging that such skill acquisition for him was a family affair, Noël acknowledged that he needed to acquire specific technical skills. "If the industry is to survive as a viable business the next generation must have access to such knowledge and insight more efficiently. Quotas are not worth much when the fish are not brought to market in the highest quality possible or not brought in at all."

"There is a huge lack of training opportunities in BC," said Garth Mirau, a founding member of the CCPFH and a representative of the Nanaimo chapter of the United Fishermen and Allied Workers Union. "For me it is all about the Department of Transportation requirements in support of safe boating. In the good old days," he added, "a rookie deckhand was protected and trained by the rest of the crew who

collectively probably had over 100 years of experience. This is what I experienced when I started fishing – a mentoring system was created where the old hands took care of the new crewmembers. Nowadays we don't have this kind of an apprenticeship system. There is less time for exposing newcomers to commercial fishing and there is a lot more to learn. With the advent of the quota system the ability of fishermen to earn a living has plummeted drastically. The old hands have moved on to other things. A formal training program is the only way we can begin to ensure there is a long-term competence within the industry." Discussing the challenges around recruitment, Mirau explained, "the current licensing system and the ability of licence holders to move their licences around to the highest bidder, which places a financial drain on the system before anybody goes to work, limits the institution of a formal recruiting plan. There is less real earning potential for people coming into the industry because the licence holders, who do not fish, cream money off the top, leaving little in the way of a living wage for the crews."

Discussing the need for accredited full-time educational programs Josh Duncan, President of the Native Brotherhood of BC said, "if we are considering a formal curriculum for training commercial fish operators, some portion of the course would have to include a period spent under supervision on an accredited boat." Representing the BC First Nations interests


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to CCPFH, Duncan described his involvement with CCPFH: “Through the Working Skills Institute we go to coastal communities and get all peoples involved in training and work facilities and processing fish. What we are trying to do is not deter our general fishing population away from fishing but to bring them back into fishing where they can be involved in the restoration and revitalization of the industry.”

A profession is defined by the core knowledge that distinguishes it from other occupations in society. The commercial fishing industry will need to identify and define its own core knowledge by first developing a consensus among competitive commercial fishing interests about what it takes to provide a high-quality fish product and create an ethical business environment in a highly competitive global market. The commercial fishing industry is continually applying new technology in high-risk and vulnerable environments, while producing multiple products, such as salmon, herring, sable, crab, geoduck, etc. The industry must define evidence-based best practices and agree on performance benchmarks that define standards of excellence in service if it is to be recognized as a profession.

Author's Postscript: Supplemental to the commentary above, the word on the street in Steveston is that the licensing and quota legacy that governs fishing in BC is forcing some com-

mercial boat owners to hire unmarried crewmembers because they can't afford to pay wages that would support a family. Some skippers even resort to hiring alcoholic and drug-dependent individuals with minimum skills who can be dried out before being put to work for very basic wages, just to reduce overhead costs, while others are exploring how they can accommodate Mexicans coming to Canada to work on their vessels to further boost their profits. These rumours, if proven, would suggest that exploitation is alive and thriving in the BC fishing industry. Perhaps the CCPFH should consider drafting a Code of Ethics on Human Rights, which members would be required to sign, that sets minimum standards for all people employed on Canadian commercial fishing vessels. If CCPFH were to commit to such a noble action, it is likely that a Code of Ethics would be a hindrance to doing business in a global labour market where exploitation generally wins out over market discipline. This dilemma raises questions about the extent to which the forces promoting “globalization” will be prepared to tolerate sustainable, owner/operator, coastal fishing communities, as promoted in CCPFH's vision statement. 

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