

Inshore fishermen endangered species

by Rick Williams

The entire fishing industry on the Canadian Atlantic coast has been treated for decades as a marginal sector of the overall economy. It therefore now suffers serious problems of underdevelopment. Neither government nor the dominant corporations have ever invested enough capital to stabilize and develop the industry. We have therefore seen the gradual take-over of the resource base by foreign fishing fleets. This has been a blow not just to the fishing industry but to the economy of the region as a whole.

By the late 1960's there was a growing awareness of the consequences of this indifference. Heavy public investment was committed to helping the largest fish companies to develop the offshore fleets and the processing capacities to compete with the foreign fleets. The Canadian share of the total catch rose significantly through this period, reaching record levels in 1968.

However, this Canadian expansion was just part of a general increase in the fishing effort off the Atlantic coast. By the early '70's there were clear signs of serious depletion among all the major fish stocks. Efforts to control overfishing were slow in coming and had limited effect. Quotas set by the International Commission on the North Atlantic Fishery (ICNAF) were based on inadequate scientific knowledge and were poorly enforced.

ICNAF regulations did not counter the general over-exploitation of the resource. As traditional groundfish stocks declined, effort was shifted to other species. But this often complicated matters, since increased catches of such species as squid, capelin, mackerel and herring were reducing the food supply for the cod and haddock stocks which were struggling to rebuild. In short, overfishing by Canadian and foreign offshore fleets has created a crisis situation from the point of view of protection of the resource base and of development of the economic base of the industry. The Canadian dragger fleets and their on-shore processing facilities have been taking a financial beating as a consequence.

During the whole of this period the inshore fishery has faced tremendous problems. Prices have not improved in relation to operating costs to any great degree. Investment money from government or the private sector has not been available to upgrade technology to the extent required. The general decline in fish stocks has affected inshore fishermen, but the most serious problem here has been competition with draggers on the inshore grounds.

In spite of these problems, inshore fishermen have upgraded their technology considerably, and have managed to stay in competition for

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stocks and markets. But their situation is very unstable, and many have dropped out or have become part-time or occasional fishermen.

Real Problems Not Tackled

The declaration of the 200 mile limit by the Canadian government at the beginning of this year undoubtedly was aimed at remedying some of these basic problems. It establishes the concept of an extended Canadian sovereignty with regard to offshore mineral rights. It makes possible a single-minded and uncomplicated approach to the regulation of fishing effort and the development of long term conservation plans. It effectively reduces foreign competition so that the Canadian companies have a virtual monopoly for whatever fish stocks and species they want to catch. If the new regulations are well enforced and the fishing capacity of the Canadian industry is expanded, the 200 Mile Zone will represent a real turning point.

But these are big "ifs", and there are real problems that have not been seriously tackled.

The presently defined zone follows an



Inshore fishermen are on the endangered species list.

arbitrary limit, 200 miles, which does not conform to the location of the major fishing grounds. Part of the Grand Banks still lie outside Canadian jurisdiction.

The present quotas and catch levels have improved little over the ICNAF regulations. A philosophy of maximum possible exploitation still predominates. There is not yet any total plan for the regulation of the entire fishery based on sound scientific knowledge. Long term planning must be based on the interdependence of different species and the regulation of the different technologies to be employed under differing environmental conditions.

Quotas and catch levels are still being negotiated with the companies and the foreign fleets—this is not sovereignty but compromise and trade-off. Canada's record for enforcement does not lead fishermen to be optimistic about the effectiveness of the new approaches to conservation.

Joint ventures with Canadian processors and foreign fleets represent a real threat to the Canadian commitment to building up the whole industry over the longer term. Although intended to keep plants working while Canadian fishing capacities are being expanded, joint ventures may encourage the companies not to invest in their own fleets but to exploit foreign fleets and their much cheaper labour. Foreign companies will be able to dump their overproduction onto the Canadian market, thereby undercutting our own producers.

At best, joint venture activities will require close regulation to prevent dumping and price instabilities. Up to now government has been weak on the issue, and there are no signs of a clear policy emerging.

Damage to Inshore Fishery

The 200 Mile Fishing Zone will not have significant effect upon the major problems faced by inshore fishermen.

One such problem is competition with draggers on the inshore grounds. The new zone will not reduce fishing by the offshore fleet in inshore areas, because it is still less expensive to catch fish close to home if they are there. Rising operational costs as well as scarcity of stocks have encouraged inshore fishing by the big boats and this won't be changed.

Draggers have also done considerable damage to the bottoms of the inshore grounds where several major species spawn. Environmental controls and regulation of technologies are problems that have not yet been considered.

Inshore fishermen suffer from a real capital shortage due to unstable prices, decline of catches, and the limited commitment of government to developing the inshore industry. The new 200 mile zone will probably drain capital investment into development of the offshore fleet—the building of freezer trawlers for example—at the cost of further disregarding inshore needs.

Increased offshore effort (and joint ventures)

will increase price instability because of overproduction. Smaller operators are unable to function well with constant and severe variations in price and market demand.

Inshore fishermen are demanding additional regulations and commitments from government which would both guarantee them some real

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place in the overall industry and contribute to its more effective development. Their demands are for:

- the implementation of a fifty mile limit barring draggers of over 65 feet from the inshore fishing grounds. This would reserve a resource base for the inshore industry and allow for the rebuilding of inshore stocks.

- the development of a total conservation plan for the regulation of the entire fishing zone. With an adequate scientific knowledge base and effective enforcement of regulations, the Atlantic fishery can be rebuilt to become a major industry for the region in contrast to its present state of over-exploitation and underdevelopment.

- inshore fishermen are opposed to joint ventures which would create price and market instability and would displace development of our own industry.

The maintenance of the inshore fishing industry is essential. It provides a population base for the industry as a whole. It accounts for three quarters of the total employment in fishing and for close to one half of the total catch. It fulfills certain functions, such as catching lobster and other high quality fresh fish, which no other part of the industry can do as effectively and economically.

The inshore fishery is, for the most part, not backward and obsolete; it is simply poor and, in certain important regards, economically exploited. With fair prices and stable demand, the inshore industry can be a sophisticated and well-organized system of food production.

The new 200 mile zone and its accompanying regulations do little or nothing about the specific problems of the inshore industry. What is required, and soon, is a plan for the rational development of the industry as a whole and a commitment to the even development of the industry. This means in particular a commitment to the maintenance and development of the inshore fishery as a crucial part of the industry as a whole and of the Atlantic Canada community.

A fifty mile limit reserved for the Inshore fishery is the first and perhaps most crucial step in the development of such a commitment.