

Fishing techniques threaten rare coral beds

BY CHRIS MILLER

The future of Nova Scotia's corals is being threatened by our strong appetites for fish sticks and cod filets.

Most people believe that corals are only found in the tropics, but in the waters off Nova Scotia there are healthy breeding grounds for deep sea corals, according to a recently released report by the Ecology Action Centre.

Heather Breeze, co-author of the coral report, presented her findings to the public last week. She found that the Nova Scotia corals grow mainly along the continental slope—the underwater cliff that separates the continental shelf from the abyssal plain of the deep

ocean. Her research examined the distribution and status of these northern coral species, and uncovered some startling trends.

Nova Scotia corals are disappearing at an alarming rate. They are falling victim to a fishing technique, known as dragging, that scours the ocean floor with large nets. These nets, according to Breeze, often destroy coral "trees" that can sometimes grow as large as 20 ft.

Derek Jones, an inshore fisherman from southwestern Nova Scotia, agrees with the findings of the report. Jones is a longliner rather than a draggerman.

"Dragging destroys the coral," Jones

said. "We see it. We witness it. But we can do nothing about it."

There have been other accusations as well. One account suggests that some fishermen actually attach huge metal chains between their trawlers and drag them along the ocean floor, purposely shattering the coral forests.

Once the coral is damaged, it takes a long time to grow back.

"Due to the slow-growing nature and large size of many of the corals found in deeper, colder waters, the ability of coral colonies to recover from dragging is likely more limited (than with tropical corals)," writes Breeze. "[Some of the corals] take six hundred years to grow one foot."

Not only are the corals unusual in themselves, they may provide essential habitat for economically important marine species, including cod, haddock and shrimp.

Dr. Martin Willison, a conservation biologist at Dalhousie University, has been looking into the destruction of the Nova Scotia corals and their associated effects on the ground-fishery.

"It is probably very important for the deep dark parts of ocean ecosystems to retain these large immobile invertebrates (the corals) because they create structural complexity on the bottom of the ocean," Willison said. "[The corals] are like the trees, bushes and herbs of the forest. Without them, there is a relative wasteland."

It has been suggested that the destruction of the coral habitat may also

have been a major contributing factor to the decline of the North Atlantic fishery. Conventional thinking places blame on over-fishing, temperature changes and an increase in the seal population, but Derek Jones isn't biting.

"It wasn't a sudden collapse," he said. "That's a lie. It's the destruction of habitat. It's politics."

Jones belongs to the Canadian Ocean Habitat Protection Society (COHPS) — a group of inshore fishermen using their knowledge of the fisheries to help conserve fish stocks.

When asked if the increase in seal population was the cause of the fisheries collapse, Jones laughed.

"From our point of view it's just crap. It's got nothing to do with seal abundance. Killing them ain't gonna help one bit. If we are to properly conserve our fisheries, we must protect fisheries habitat."

Nova Scotian corals differ from their southern counterparts because they do not have symbiotic relationships with photosynthetic algae. This prevents them from obtaining energy directly from the sun. Instead, the corals must gain nutrients from the surrounding water by catching particles that drift past them.

Although more than 20 species of coral have been discovered off Nova Scotia, some experts estimate the true figure could exceed 100. One of these species is of special interest to scientists because it may not be found anywhere else in the world, making it truly unique

to Atlantic Canada.

Dr. Willison suggests that the corals should be conserved within a system of marine protected areas.

"One way [to preserve the corals] is to use marine protected areas," Willison said. "Corals within the marine protected areas could then be protected by disallowing all activities that might damage them."

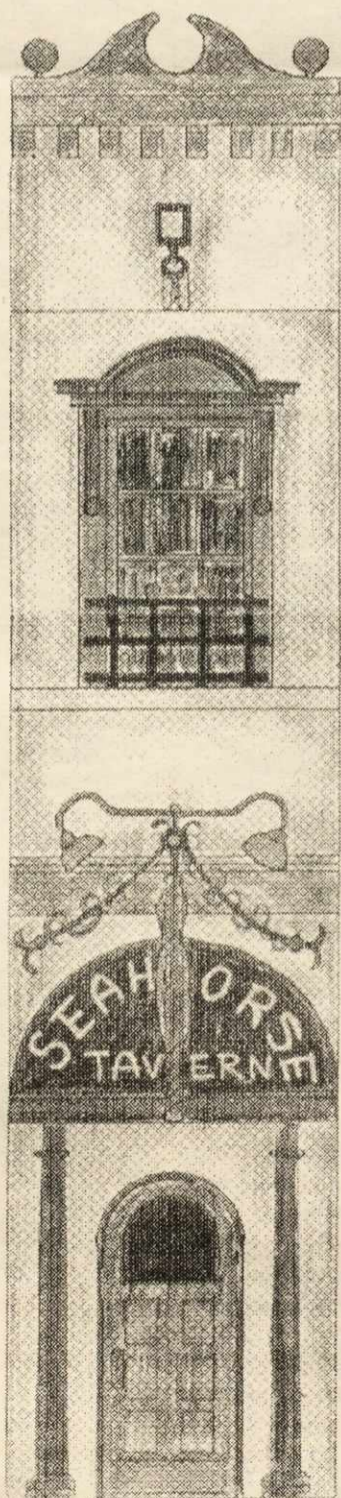
The Department of Fisheries and Oceans is currently examining the feasibility of establishing marine protected areas in Nova Scotia and at least one member of the department was present at the coral presentation last week.

Willison would also like to see the corals defined as a 'critical habitat', under the Fisheries Act, to help protect them from damaging activities. He suggests, however, that legislation would do little to protect the corals without sufficient education and enforcement programs.

One of the sites where corals were found off Nova Scotia is a submerged canyon known as the Sable Island Gully. It has already been identified as a hotspot for biodiversity by the World Wildlife Fund. The presence of coral will likely add to its ecological significance. The fragile ecosystems of the Gully are at risk, however, of not only falling victim to dragging, but also to the \$3-billion Sable Offshore Energy Project which has recently been given a green light to develop petroleum reserves off Nova Scotia.

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Plan to save right whales 'doomed'

BY GREG MCFARLANE

A plan to save the North Atlantic right whale from extinction will fail if it does not include the interests of fishing associations, says Klaus Sonnenberg, the General Manager of the Grand Manan Fishing Association.

The plan — a Department of Fisheries and Oceans (DFO) initiative — is designed to increase the population of the endangered whale species. Similar to one drafted in the United States in 1991, it would create two right whale conservation areas, one in the Bay of Fundy and the other southwest of Nova Scotia in the Roseway Basin.

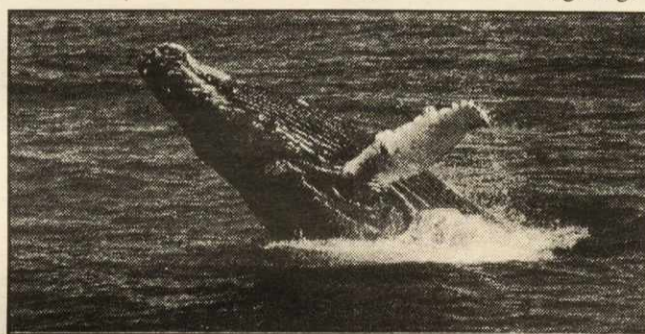
While these conservation areas have existed in principle, there has been no legislation governing the behaviour of vessels in the areas. The implementation of the plan could result in the movement of established shipping lanes in and out of Saint John Harbour.

"Ship strikes have hindered the growth in population, and [some whales] have scars [indicating] fishing gear entanglement," said Jerry Conway, a DFO fisheries

advisor at the helm of the project.

Conway says that he is aware of the fishing industry's concerns, but there are other interests involved.

"The biggest problem [that the plan will encounter] is going to be the balancing between the interests of the whales, the reality of the shipping companies and the requirements of the fishing industry," Conway said. "If



for any collaboration. DFO, and Conway specifically, has refused to include fishermen and shipping companies. His initiatives will be doomed," Sonnenberg said.

Also, Sonnenberg says the movement of shipping lanes will not limit the number of right whales being struck by vessels.

"[One day] there were three sightings of right whale groups; one group was twenty miles offshore, another was fifteen miles [offshore], and the other was ten miles offshore. Moving the shipping lanes may be an ineffective solution."

Sonnenberg says there is no substitute for including interested parties in the decision making.

"We have to become involved in the process," he said, "and not just through discussions with media representatives. The whole process will be jeopardized by [Conway's] unwillingness to include fishing interests."

Still, Conway does not yet see the need for a collective decision making process.

"The plan is in its infancy," he said. "Once we develop recommendations, we'll consult with industry as to the impact on them."

shipping lanes are moved, then it could devastate fishing communities. It could be a chain reaction.

"It's going to require the collaboration of all stakeholders to come to an equitable point where we can all live together with minimum impact," Conway said.

However, Sonnenberg says that Conway has refused to include fishing associations in discussions regarding the areas, one of which is situated directly east of Grand Manan Island.

"So far, [Conway] hasn't asked