

The Atlantic industry rich in resources and experience

Canada's Atlantic fishing industry is based on several resource strengths. One is raw material. The amount of fish in coastal waters depends on the width of the continental shelf, which in these parts, is one of the widest in the world, reaching in places out beyond the 200-mile zone — and some of the world's richest fishing grounds are found above it.

Other Canadian fisheries assets include an unsurpassed pool of skills and experience and a highly diverse fishing fleet. The Atlantic fishing industry employs 52 300 full-time and part-time fishermen. The fleet comprises two main categories: some 29 000 vessels of under 19.8 metres (65 feet) making up the "inshore" fleet and about 30 000 vessels over that size — the "off-shore" fleet. The offshore category includes 240 large trawlers owned by a few companies which combine processing and fishing operations. These vessels can spend 10 to 12 days at sea, and can fish in all kinds of weather, year round, even in the wind-lashed, ice-infested waters north of Newfoundland and Labrador in winter.

Vast stocks of groundfish (so called because they live close to the ocean bed) are the backbone of the Atlantic fishery. They include cod, flounder, red-fish, haddock, poolock and turbot and are caught by both inshore and offshore fishermen, with about 45 per cent of the catch taken by the deepsea trawlers.

The groundfish catch is converted into many product forms. About 60 per cent is sold as frozen fillets and blocks, 25 per cent (almost all of it, cod) is salted. Less than 10 per cent is sold fresh.

It was danger to the groundfish stocks, posed by uncontrolled fishing, that led Canada to declare its 200-mile zone in 1977. Difficulties began in the 1950s when the fishing fleets of the world moved from salting to more modern methods of processing, including the freezing and processing of their catches at sea in large factory trawlers. Under the impact of virtually around-the-clock exploitation, the groundfish catch soared from 1.5 million tonnes in the 1950s to 2.8 million tonnes in 1965. Then, predictably, the returns diminished. Thereafter, although fishing efforts continued unabated, catches declined with the Canadian groundfish industry taking the brunt of the loss.

With the declaration of the 200-mile zone, Canadian fisheries authorities instituted a rigorous program of conservation including strict limits on catches. Since then, the groundfish stocks have made a remarkable comeback. Canadian catches, which had sunk to 418 000 tonnes in 1974 rose to 779 000 tonnes in 1981.