

# **Charting a Path Through an Uncertain Future: Lessons from Our History**

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**Abstract:** The history of our fishing industry gives us insights into the 'megatrends' and socioeconomic forces that will shape our future, and also provides us tools for addressing the problems of the present. The future will be less predictable than the past, due to a wide variety of economic and physical global changes, so our best strategy lies in flexibility. Current fisheries management models, however, are tending to be more and more rigid, not more flexible. Global competition is also here to stay and needs to be factored into all our market decisions. To survive, our industry needs to press for consistent, world-wide protections of marine resources, for more flexible abundance-based management systems, for rational international markets, to make alliances with public interest and environmental protection groups and to organize not only locally but worldwide.

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## **A LOOK INTO THE FUTURE**

What I want to do today is not just look back at the history of our industry, which many other capable people here have already done, but also to encapsulate some of the lessons from that history that can give us guidance to our future. History is a trajectory. Often it may be just a matter of projecting from current major trends to see where that trajectory will likely lead us. From that effort, perhaps we can get some insight to help us deal with the problems we are facing right now. The main thing I want to talk about today are these 'megatrends.'

In this analysis I bring my own experience working on environmental and especially marine resource protection issues for about 25 years, and also particularly working with PCFFA on its many fisheries conservation programs for the past 10 years. I am also Conservation Program Director for PCFFA's sister organization, the Institute for Fisheries Resources (IFR), which is a fishermen-created and fishermen-based environmental and habitat protection organization. IFR is active especially on west coast salmon restoration issues, but also on a number of other important fisheries protection issues coastwide.

## **BOTH PROBLEMS AND PROMISE**

We have a lot of problems in our fisheries but also a number of bright points, including a tremendous number of resources that we can use to help resolve those problems. Our organizations have been doing everything they can to both chart out what these problems are, as well as to identify opportunities and look at what resources we can bring to bear on these problems from among fishing families and fishing dependent communities.

The most obvious problem we've got is that fisheries are a limited resource. Nonetheless, a lot of our management theory (and not just for marine resources but natural resource management theory generally) is still based on the hidden assumption that there is a limitless frontier, that we do not have to worry terribly much about running out of fish and that we do not have to worry about zero-sum games forcing people to fight over limited resources because we can always 'move west,' or 'move deeper' or move our fleets out into other areas. That is obviously no longer true.

Thus we are now facing limitations not only imposed by fundamental biological limits, but also severe management and jurisdictional limits, which are in some ways more stringent. As a result, the management

systems established to cope with these biological and jurisdictional limits have become more and more rigid, more and more inflexible.

For instance, limited entry programs were imposed primarily for conservation reasons to prevent overfishing. Individual Transferrable Quotas (ITQs) and things like that are driven by both economic and conservation purposes. Licensing and transferability restrictions between states and different countries are also examples of not only the fragmented management systems that we have, but also were imposed primarily for sound conservation purposes as well as efforts to protect local fleets. That's probably sound conservation in a predictable world - so far as it goes.

## **THE FUTURE WILL BE LESS PREDICTABLE**

However, if there is one fundamental we are sure to face as an industry over the next 50 years, its uncertainty. In addition to biological uncertainty worldwide, we also have political uncertainty and a tremendous number of economic uncertainties as globalization of our markets brings us increasing marketing volatility and competition worldwide. Unfortunately, the way to survive uncertainty is through the flexibility of having many options, not the inflexibility and systematic reduction of options that rigid management systems inevitably bring.

In other words, our management regimes are moving towards more and more inflexible quota allocation systems in a time when rigid systems of this sort are less and less likely to help the long-term survival of our industry. With major ocean regime shifts already occurring, particularly with global warming impacts exacerbating these problems in unknown ways, we are talking Big Time Change, and with so many unknowns looming so large before us, we are now moving into a time when we cannot accurately predict the future based on the past. We never really could completely, but our management models and population estimates, simplistic as they are, did at least have some predictive power, but always based on the assumption that the future would look much like the past. This is clearly no longer true.

As several other presenters at this conference have shown us eloquently, we are already in the early stages of dramatic world-wide changes in ocean regimes, harvest management regimes, species redistributions and population collapses, etc. In a world of unpredictable change, all our predictive models and projections are thus becoming increasingly irrelevant and may in fact be dangerous to rely on.

Increasingly rigid management systems and unpredictable change inherently clash, and I think we have to resolve that clash quickly. If we don't, we will wind up with more crises, more collapses, but with less mobility for fishermen to get into one fishery or another in response to closures elsewhere. Clearly mobility can lead to overcapacity problems, but increasingly our management regimes are based on numbers and quotas which are getting more and more fixed in a rapidly fluctuating biological system. When managers impose a fixed quota at a mean total allowable catch (TAC) in a fluctuating system, for instance, that always results in overfishing at least half the time. In such a system, without sufficient time to fully recover (often several years), the fishery is quickly driven into a downward spiraling crash. We have already seen that many times.

## **COMPETITION IS HERE TO STAY**

Another problem here to stay is increasing foreign competition. Every year there is more international market competition as globalization pits fishermen here against fishermen in Asia and all around the world for the same markets. This is only going to get worse. That became obvious after a major crisis for US albacore fishermen in 1998 when we had to endure a tremendous influx of Asian tuna dumped on our limited markets and overwhelming US processors because of the collapse of several Asian economies in Singapore, Hong Kong and the Philippines. This surplus tuna put our fishermen in these very ports totally out of work. Sure there was a great US tuna catch, but nowhere to market it. Finally it took federal intervention with disaster relief money to convince the processors to take any of our catch. Even so, many boats fished tuna that year at a huge loss.

In thinking that problem through it also became obvious to our industry that we had to take an active role in such international trade organizations as the World Trade Organization (WTO), where major fishing and marketing issues are being predetermined by people with no biological or fisheries management expertise, no experience in the industry, and who definitely do not have our interests at heart. Right now there are no commercial fishermen involved anywhere in the WTO process (see *Fishermen's News* Nov. '99, "The WTO: Flying Under Fishermen's Radar," <http://www.pond.net/~pcffa/fn-nov99.htm>). This is why PCFFA is pushing to at least have commercial fishermen involved in the U.S. Trade Representative's Advisory Committees, and has applied for non-governmental organization observer status to the WTO.

More and more uncertainties and increasing competition will inevitably result from the globalization of international markets. In addition to aquaculture's problems with pollution, habitat destruction, transgenic gene pool pollution and invasive species issues, we also will have increasing competition for current market share between wild products and aquaculture products. Those two forces are not going to go away any time in the foreseeable future, but are going to continue to depress our prices, make more fishing and processing operations economically marginal, and make it much more difficult for those who remain in the fishery to make a good living and survive.

Couple that with archaic government programs that still actually subsidize building greater harvest capacity to chase fewer and fewer fish, in a more and more interconnected and depressed world market, and you have the makings of disaster after disaster. To date our governments response to overcapacity has also been ineffective.

I don't know if people have seen it, but the US General Accounting Office (GAO) here in this country just published a report on fisheries buyback programs generally and concluded that they have never really succeeded in reducing overcapacity (see: <http://www.gao.gov>, "Commercial Fisheries: Entry of Fishermen Limits Benefits of Buyback Programs," GAO Report RCED-00-120 (6/14/00)). We have to make fleet capacity reduction programs work to allow people to exit these overcapitalized fisheries in a graceful way so we can actually reduce excess harvest effort, not just shift it around. Institutionally this country has done an abysmal job for fishermen and fishing communities in letting fishermen make the transition to other fisheries or out of fishing altogether.

## **INVASIONS OF EXOTIC SPECIES AND DETERIORATING HABITAT**

Some of the problems I see in addition to these include exotic species invasions. Invasive species are a big sleeper with enormous potential for damage, and with lots of problems already appearing. Just recently, for instance, there was a toxic algae mass spotted just off San Diego of an exotic species already responsible for crashing a large number of European fisheries. For some unknown reason it was allowed to be imported for use in small fish aquaria, and got into the ocean simply from being washed down household drains. Now they are in the west coast marine ecosystem. There are a number of other serious exotic species invasion problems we are facing all over the west coast. As we become more globally interconnected, this problem will also get worse.

There is also, of course, the gradual deterioration not only of inland salmon habitat, which has been in the news and is a lot easier to see, but marine habitats are suffering deterioration coastwide as well from offshore oil, pollution problems, and toxic wastes flushed out into estuaries. Coastal development is going to impact marine resources more and more. In this country, and I am sure in most other countries, population growth and urban development within 50 miles of the coastline is proceeding at about four times the national average. This long-term trend is likely to cause major stress on all our coastal resources, particularly wetlands vital to many species at various life stages, for the foreseeable future.

## **MAINTAINING STANDARDS INTERNATIONALLY**

Along with the international pressure on prices is a tendency to 'dumb down' the fisheries protections we do have that are necessary for fisheries conservation. There is an effort by many countries who have much less developed fisheries management regimes than we do to take advantage of that fact and flood our markets from essentially

unsustainable fisheries. This is at the cost of their own people in the long-run, but to the short-term profit of a small number of multinational companies that can move those goods quickly from one market to another. We must resist the call, in the name of 'remaining competitive,' to loosen our own conservation standards so that our fisheries too become unsustainable in the long run. Fishermen can only lose in the process. Instead we need to use every available international tool to bring the level of the playing field up to our level, not down to theirs.

We also really desperately need a workable international fisheries management regime. Because of a lack of international management mechanisms we have very little international control over highly migratory species, though there are some efforts now in that direction.

### **INCREASING ANTE TO PLAY THE GAME**

Another problem, frankly, is that as you have greater and greater up front capital investment entry costs to get into a fishery (purchase of a boat, license and gear or a processing plant), you wind up having fewer and fewer opportunities to do so. We need to keep it possible for the small independent community entrepreneur to produce a value added product that takes what might otherwise be waste (bycatch) and makes it useful. We cannot waste any more, waste is unforgivable in today's world. We've got to find uses for everything we land and everything that can be used. We also have to keep the entrepreneurial spirit alive in our industry to help make this happen.

I am also worried that we have a whole generation of experienced, seasoned captains out there and we don't have many people coming up through the ranks to replace them. We won't have a continuation of that knowledge base that we really need if we have an aging fleet in an industry in which it has become harder and harder to make a living. That seriously concerns us.

### **ORGANIZE, ORGANIZE**

Now for some of the bright points. Our industry is better organized on this coast than anywhere in the country, probably better than anywhere in the world. There is more cooperation among ports and among various interest groups here than anywhere else.

Our organization, PCFFA, is a federation of 22 different fishermen's marketing associations and vessel owner's associations primarily organized around dealing with common threats. About 20 years ago, then Secretary of Interior James Watt came up with the bright idea of leasing major oil development rights throughout the most productive fisheries and nursery beds on the west coast. That was just shortly after the great Santa Barbara oil spill of 1968. We fought it and won. Then just ten years ago we had the Exxon Valdez oil spill. Had PCFFA not won the offshore oil development battle in California and the Northwest much earlier, that spill (and many more) would have been here. Had PCFFA not successfully fought that and many other battles, most of us would not be in this business, much less in this room.

We always have to organize. A lot of what I do and a lot of what our organization does is the hard, nitty-gritty political work, in Congress and in the Legislatures, to try to help fishermen and to help fishing communities survive. We need to do much more of that, and there is always more to do.

### **MAKING ALLIES, WINNING BATTLES**

Another bright point is that as an industry we also tend to be very progressive, particularly on habitat protection issues, and we work well with public interest and environmental groups of all sorts -- far more so than portions of our industry in other parts of the country. The difference this makes is phenomenal. If you lose the public's trust as an industry and a public resource user you slip quickly into a downward spiral. We have avoided that trap.

As a result, we have survived several bruising efforts to ban commercial fishermen altogether. Our industry

recently successfully fought off two bruising ballot initiatives in Washington State that would have put us out of business entirely -- campaigns won because of overwhelming support for our industry by environmental groups and the general public. Likewise in every west coast legislature there are efforts nearly every session to ban commercial fishing which we have successfully fought.

In Florida, however, it took only one initiative and much of the industry was dead. Anti-fishermen initiatives succeeded in the Gulf and Southeast because the commercial fishing industry there had managed to alienate its constituency (the people who eat its products), alienate its potential allies in the environmental movement, and to alienate each other through constant infighting without working toward a common good. PCFFA is doing its darndest on the west coast to avoid similar mistakes and to work as a unified industry on a lot of these common issues together with all the allies and friends we can find.

### **OUR DIVERSITY IS OUR STRENGTH**

Another bright point is that we still have an intact, small boat and mid-sized boat diversified fishery throughout the region, and that really is the lifeblood of our industry. We need to keep it that way by supporting policies that protect the small boat fishery, and which support the ability of people to get into a fishery whenever there is a fishery to get into. The flexibility we need to survive rapid change comes from these people.

Another thing that we've got, and we need to recognize, is an incredible reservoir of knowledge, experience and professionalism in our industry coastwide. When we tap that, and when we also tap and work with the scientific community (there's lots of interchange between us and them), I think we have a tremendous resource we can bring to bear on any problem.

Finally, one of the most important things commercial fishermen can do is to keep organizing. Support your local associations, get involved in the Legislature, and help with the effort to organize fishermen and fishing-dependent communities worldwide. The World Forum of Fish Harvesters and Fishworkers (WFF), for instance, is working to organize community based and family based fishing operations in every country to try to deal with problems facing us all over the world (information on WFF is available at the top of the PCFFA website at: <http://www.pond.net/~pcffa>). Those problems may have different faces, they may be in different stages of development, but they are basically very similar. Fishermen all over the world are now learning from each other to develop the tools to cope with what are now global fisheries and marine protection issues.

Its important that we know and learn from our history. That history also teaches us that we can control our destiny as we progress into an uncertain future by what actions we do, by what kind of policies we push for, and by what kind of vision we have for that future.

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