

The State of British Columbia's Fisheries

Which is more important – what we do, or how we do it? The present system of fisheries management tries to address a multitude of issues presented by different user groups, each based on diverse theories and all with different agendas. Some of the issues are offered with good intentions and some others are based on selfishness and greed. How can we expect to achieve meaningful results when we continue follow this format? This begs several questions: 1) how do we identify and unify the various agendas; 2) how do we determine the important issues, which need solutions; and 3) how do we evaluate results of what we accomplish?

Right now the various processes enacted in the name of the fisheries management are like a multi-headed monster of differing policies and criteria such as Individual Quotas, Integrated Fisheries, the creation of Management Associations and special agreements between government and these Associations. It seems the processes are purposely designed to make management convenient for fisheries managers but perplexing for fishermen.

Instead of more efficient management we have just the opposite:

more complex management, higher costs and more responsibility transferred to NGO's and the fishing industry.

As costs rise and less of the available catch is attained, the economic benefits are removed from most of the participants. This process only results in more of the Total Allowable Catch left in the water each year along with the loss of access to resources for the many to benefit the few. As we continue to protect areas, quotas are reduced and protected areas double. Some of what was once our fishing grounds are no longer fishable because of by-catch, and as a result of less fishing pressure species become more abundant. When we designate other areas as Rockfish protected areas or ecological protected areas and fishers can no longer fish there. As by-catch is reduced through avoidance, the government uses these reduced catch statistics to determine species abundance and because of low catch rates more are designated species at risk.

With little actual stock assessment, it is impossible to ascertain abundance of many species, and the increasing numbers of what were once by-catch species compete for feed for what was once the target species, thus reducing the abundance of targeted species and perhaps their growth rate. Halibut for example have experienced slower growth rates in the last decade. Do we know the cause?

This brings us back to the question of what we are trying to achieve and the methods of evaluation. Has anyone given any thought to what we have achieved? From what I can see the costs transferred to industry through management regulation has increased significantly, while in the same period the number of active fishers has decreased proportionately. Halibut Total Allowable Catch is almost the lowest in history. Sablefish TAC is decreasing. The abundance of salmon coast-wide is the lowest ever recorded. The fishable fishing grounds are the smallest they've ever been. The populations of many coastal communities are at the lowest numbers in 50 years, and many small community businesses are closing. As well, there are fewer, and in some cases no, service providers left in these communities. Over capitalization has increased the number of licensed and unlicensed vessels that can no longer afford to fish, and that in turn has increased the number of processors that have nothing to process.

Each year the amount of the total allowable catch left in the water in almost every quota fishery, in every species, has increased, while at the same time the quota is being reduced almost every year. What little profitability that is left in the industry is a result of accumulation of quota, or accumulation of processing. This is fisheries management?

Our governments, provincial and federal and their ministries and bureaucracies, are responsible for these results. By not living up to their responsibilities and commitment to manage the renewable resources of this province and this country they are letting down all Canadians. The advisory process, although as dysfunctional as its creator, does have one common goal:

It has been unanimously advocating for stock assessment, Habitat protection and the removal of open pen fish farming. However, this advice and call for appropriate expenditures required to manage our fisheries, Habitat and communities are ignored.

So to answer the question asked at the beginning...which is more important – what we do, or how we do it? The answer is, both. The State of British Columbia's Fisheries depends on the cause and effect of all user groups, NGO's, and governments working to accomplish the same goals.

Gerald Dalum

www.fishingforfreedom.ca