

The mantle of 'going green'

Fishworkers' organizations need to think hard about the merits of associating with corporate environmental ventures

The Anglo-Dutch food giant, Unilever, is going 'green'. It is committing itself to eventually purchasing only fish caught from fisheries certified to be conservation-friendly. The fisheries would be certified, or otherwise, by an 'independent' world council being spearheaded by the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) and Unilever.

From a Canadian point of view, the call for 'codes of conduct' and sustainable fishing practices seems to be coming from the very industry people most directly implicated in the devastation of our demersal stocks. The new-found piety and heartfelt concern for the resource is not completely credible and the 'green' mantle seems to be adopted to deflect public rage at what has already occurred, while serving to maintain the perpetrators in the future fishery.

Clearing an ecologically and conservationally sound fishery is eminently sensible and consumers may support such certification. However, I am not sure if Canada's cod fishery would have been so certified even six months before its collapse. And I am sure our herring fishery would be certified at present, even though some inshore fishermen have been virtually eliminated by intense fishing by large purse-seines.

The constituency of inshore and artisanal fishermen faces overwhelming problems, which often arise from the 'industrialized' fleets' inefficient, backward, archaic and other low-level features.

So, when the Marine Stewardship Council clears a fishery as sustainable, will it consider the co-option of fishing grounds by 'industrial' fleets at the expense of the small-boat fishers and their communities? Hardly likely. It will be designated as a

political problem and the people at Unilever and WWF selling the 'new hope', will look on governments with disdain and label the public sector as venal, while happily embracing the market as "replacing our democratic institutions as the key determinant in our society."

Goodness knows that there is a need for resource conservation in the marine sector, but fishers in Canada might be excused if they remain sceptical of environmentalists working through the marketplace to save resources.

At present, a herd of grey seals is growing exponentially on the Eastern Scotian shelf. Scientists calculated that they consume up to 80,000 tonnes of infant and juvenile cod each year, while this area of the shelf is under a total fishing moratorium and the prognosis for this particular cod species is the bleakest among all the cod stocks in Atlantic Canada. Yet, whenever a new seal hunt is contemplated for market purposes, the WWF takes out hysterical ads in the national newspapers, decrying such hunts.

I think fishworkers' organizations have enough on their tables simply supporting the organization of inshore fishers. There seems no need to get into some sort of corporatist venture with agribusinesses and world environmentalists. ♣

This piece is written by Michael Belliveau, a member of ICSF and Executive Secretary, Maritime Fisherman's Union, Shecciac, New Brunswick, Canada