

New Brunswick

Bearing the brunt

Many inshore fisher people of New Brunswick believe that, going by government policies and actions, their sector of the industry is scheduled for elimination

by Chantal Abord-Hugon

Chantal Abord-Hugon has been involved with development education and community work for the last 12 years, mainly with women of coastal fishing communities. An associate member of ICSF, she has also been linked with ICSF's Women in Fisheries programme. She is now a doing her masters in environmental studies.

New Brunswick fisheries have been able to remain healthy and economically viable with slightly higher landings and an export value that has more than doubled in the last decade. Since it is a coastal, multispecies fisheries, it has been less severely affected than the fisheries in some other provinces that have suffered collapses, especially of groundfish stocks.

New Brunswick has 1,400 inshore owner-operator fishers. They use mainly fixed gear, are well spread along the coast, and belong to 70 fishing communities. The inshore fishery relies mainly on lobster. This fishery is managed by effort control rather than by quota. Lobster stocks have been sustained and lobster prices have increased in recent years. Inshore fishers in New Brunswick are members of the Maritime

Fishermen's Union (MFU). This organization has been working towards reducing the inshore fleet's reliance on lobster, and towards a sustainable multi-species approach, with initiatives such as a long-term scallop enhancement programme.

Many inshore fisher people believe that, going by government policies and actions, their sector of the industry is scheduled for elimination. In the 1980s, for example, a Royal Commission recommended reducing the number of fishers by 50 per cent and, since then, government management has been working to privatize the resource through different quota allocation systems and partnership agreements. Fishing ownership has become more concentrated as a result. Globalization has opened up new markets and increased the value

of landings, but a shift towards harvesting more shellfish by mid-shore vessels and reduced processing, have pushed aside small inshore fishers and reduced the number of fish-plant workers, mainly women. As a result, fewer people are sharing more wealth from what used to be a common pool resource. Women are those losing the most.

Government management decisions are still motivated by politics, and corporations are very active in lobbying to maintain their privileges and unsustainable fishing methods. Evidence for this can be found in the most recent government decision related to the way cod will be allocated in the southern gulf of St. Lawrence when cod stocks reach 10 per cent of their historical level. In New Brunswick, nine mid-shore mobile gear vessels have received twice the amount of quota that has been allocated to over 600 inshore licence holders. The mid-shore will be allowed to fish a full month using mobile gear, while the inshore fishers will each be limited to two days of fishing with a maximum of 10 nets per enterprise. Inshore fisher people are outraged to see the government reinstalling a fishing system that they believe caused the collapse of the resource, while ignoring more sustainable practices.

Women play an important role in the fishery, but they still remain invisible and absent from the fishing organizations and decision-making bodies. Some women are now fishing as crew members with their husbands in an attempt to keep the income of the fishing enterprise in the family, but this is still a marginal phenomenon in New Brunswick. Fishermen's wives are sometimes referred to as skippers of the shore crew and play an important role in supporting the enterprise through such activities as preparation of the gear, purchases and book-keeping.

Women in the fisheries have no formal organization. The *Comité des femmes côtières du Nouveau-Brunswick* was formed in 1994 as a loose network within three different regions. It has been organizing conferences and workshops for women in coastal communities in order to break their isolation and give them a voice. Having identified the question of equity as their main concern, over the past year, they have joined two provincial women's coalitions: the Women's World March 2000 and the Women's Union for Pay Equity.