

Nova Scotia

Profits for a few

The common person can never afford to become a fish harvester again

by Mary Desroches

Mary Desroches is a member and volunteer in several non-profit organizations such as Coastal Communities Network (CCN), FishNet, Western Area Women's Coalition, Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, and Women's CED Network. CCN developed as a provincial umbrella organization with its membership representing rural and coastal organizations to provide a collective 'Large Voice for Small Communities'. Since it was founded in 1992, CCN provides a forum for these organizations to find common ground for activities and information sharing.

CCN has just completed a Rural Revitalization Project aimed at strengthening regional and provincial networks. As I worked on this project, I was fascinated by the way each regional pilot took on a life of its own. In one region, the focus was on raising awareness about Community Based Management (CBM) of our resources. Workshops were held in four counties to both spark interest and increase participation in developing and implementing a pilot CBM plan for the Fundy region. Another region began a process of cross-cultural dialogue with First Nations, the black community, Acadian and communities of European descent. The three dialogue dinners held have provided a safe atmosphere for each culture to learn about one another and to recognize our similarities. An outcome has been the recognition of our similar values that will be the foundation of working together to bridge the gaps within the cultural diversity of rural Nova Scotia. Although the Rural Revitalization project has ended, activities to move CBM and cross-cultural dialogue forward continues.

Many fishery organizations and some provincial organizations have developed to deal with public concerns and are very active. Consultation with government representatives continues, but, in most cases, to no avail. Over the past decade, thousands of meetings have been held with government officials, with very clear requests for fair policies that protect the rights of coastal people and the environment. However, the same policy directives continue to appear:

privatization of the best wharves, while wharves in poor condition are unloaded onto small communities. The privatization of fisheries resources continues, even as our diverse forests are clear-cut, our waters become highly polluted, and there is a substantial increase in the number of families living in poverty.

Currently, I'm working with The Women for Economic Equality Society (WEE). We are working on a pilot project called Women's Community Economic Development Network (WCEDN) in three counties of Nova Scotia. One of our goals is to assist women with information and workshops to develop or strengthen homebased and small businesses. The Learning Series of self-help modules aims to strengthen existing or newly organized groups. Over 200 people in Nova Scotia, PEI, and Newfoundland have just completed a test of this model, with participants' suggestions incorporated into the final draft.

I am a woman of the fisheries. My culture and my family's way of life have always been 'the sea' as far back as one can trace. My husband, who has fished in the Fundy region for 25 years, started his fishing life at the age of 12, alongside his father in Prince Edward Island. His family also comes from a traditional culture based on earning a livelihood from the sea. Our grown children, as well as my husband and I, are in the throes of building an alternative way of life that provides the basics and a bit of security for the future. Why are my family and thousands of other fishing families facing the necessity to change our culture, our way of life? Especially when this way of life has depended on a renewable resource that could not be destroyed by sustainable methods of fishing such as hook-and-line?

The devastation of the various species of fish stocks that once were plentiful in our region began in the late 1950s with the introduction of new technology. By the early 1960s, overfishing was having a negative impact, with fishing folk having to travel further and further from home to find groundfish. The slaughter of fish stocks continues today in this region, as two of the three remaining species being fished are in trouble. Yet, the fishing industry in Nova Scotia is doing well in terms of 'profit for a few', with the overall value of the fishery not dropping once since the devastation of the Atlantic groundfish.

So, with such great landed value from our fish stocks, what is all this talk of a fishing crisis? It is evident to us: corporate takeovers, the quota system, public policies

implemented by the government including support for privatization of our natural resources, continued downloading of responsibilities to communities and community organizations, continued removal of government responsibility for infrastructure vital to the survival of coastal and rural communities. The resulting issues include rising costs, deteriorating, unsafe harbours with no place to dock, stress, unhealthy communities, conflicts between individuals, cultures and communities. All these actually arise from policy directives.

In all this, the reality of people's lives remains invisible. Invisible are the truly emotional trials of adjustment that families have to confront both within the home and within the community. Fishing families, men and women, have lost not only their livelihood but also their identity. Men have been socialized to believe that they are the main 'breadwinners', the 'kings of their castles.'

What happens when their livelihood is ripped away from them? Often, in this situation, men go into denial, then withdrawal. Fear for the future is an underlying,



ongoing concern. There is loss of self-esteem, selfconfidence, and blaming of self for failure, because we live in a society that claims that anyone can be successful if they work hard enough.

Put it all together and those with the decision-making power continue to disregard the generations of families who earned their livelihood from the sea. A culture, a way of life, is facing 'genocide' in the first degree. Women are dealing with stress, added responsibility to hold the family together in dire economic times, suicide or fear of suicide, and, in many cases, conforming to the status quo (for example, accepting ITQs) against

personal values and principles in order to continue to make a living from the sea. Each year, neighbors and family helplessly watch their members succumb to the ever-increasing pressures and costs that force yet another family out of the fishing industry.

How many families have been negatively affected by the fishery crisis of the 1980s and 1990s? Fifty thousand Atlantic Canadians were displaced from the fishing industry by 1995. At that time, thousands more uncounted people fell through the cracks of the income-support programmes. Over the last five years, the displacement of small-scale fishworkers and fish harvesters and the loss of a way of life continue. What is it really like to live in the midst of this trial and tribulation? What does it take to go beyond this level of hopelessness to move into the mode of resiliency that has allowed Atlantic Maritime peoples to remain in their homeland? Where do we take account of the courage to pack up your family and to move in hopes of finding that alternative livelihood elsewhere? Where do we account for the loss of the extended family that supports each other throughout these periods of economic hardship?

The new wave of fisheries under quota systems allows for a paper fish market that is traded on stock markets. The owners of these fish resource may never see the Atlantic waters, let alone catch a fish. Invisible owners of our fish. Invisible pain and suffering of coastal women and men. What needs to be recognized and supported is the tremendous courage and determination of these Maritime families to move beyond these stages resulting from a severe loss of a way of life and living that is robbed not only from this generation but also from our children and our grandchildren.

All of my four children left Nova Scotia to find jobs in other places. All have returned home and are doing as well as they did in their travels. My family is still dependent on our natural resources to survive. We are adjusting, adapting. Those terms instilled from somewhere beyond. The common person can never afford to become a fish harvester again. It is time that the toll on families, the emotional turmoil, poverty, uncertainty, and fear be recognized and addressed. Politicians must be held accountable for their decisions that cause such havoc in the lives of our families, our communities, and our environment. For us, it is not over yet. We are trying hard to rebuild our lives. It is not easy.