

# Temporary steps will no longer do

**The destruction of Northern cod resources has jeopardized lives in hundreds of fishing communities in Canada**

It is by now fairly well known that overfishing has depleted the Atlantic Ocean's resources of Northern cod to abysmally low levels. The ongoing crisis in this fishery has indubitably disrupted the jives of fishing communities in Canada. How this has happened is dramatically illustrated by the case of the Fogo Islanders.

Fogo Island is a small island in the Northwest Atlantic, off the coast of Newfoundland, Canada. Its population of 4,500 people comprises nine communities.

Geographically, the island is located on a particularly rich fishing ground. Naturally, therefore, the fishery is the principal source of livelihood for the island's communities.

Traditionally, Fogo Island fishermen have relied on the inshore groundfish allocation for their source of fresh fish, most of which is Northern cod, as well as other groundfish, crab and pelagics. Their boats range from 16-footer wooden ones to 65-footer steel ones and their gear include traps and gill nets.

Fogo Islanders are known to be passionately attached to their island. In the 1960s, rather than give in to the Provincial Government's resettlement programme and move out of Fogo Island, they formed their own worker-producer co-operative.

The Fogo Island Fisheries Co-operative, established in 1967, has since been the mainstay of the island's fishing economy.

When formed, it had a small membership of 125, with total investments of \$625, but now the number of members has swelled to 1,200 and investments have almost touched \$3 million.

According to Bernadette Dwyer, past president of the Co-operative, "We work in a non-unionized environment as we are worker/owners. The co-op's achievements are many and, indeed, we have a lot to be proud of." Today it comprises 700 fishermen and 500 plant workers. In normal times, it operates five plants and notches up annual sales of \$10-15 million.

But these are certainly not normal times. As Dwyer elaborates, "The present crisis in the Northern cod fishery has thrown our lives into total chaos. This major reduction in our supply of raw material has translated directly into loss of income to our fishermen, employment to our plant workers, revenue to our co-operative and a weaker economy to our island."

The 1992 moratorium on fishing for Northern cod was meant to be temporary, lasting for two years. During this period, Newfoundland fishermen relinquished their right to fish so as to protect the long-term viability of the resource base and to allow stock to rebuild. To help the fishermen and plant workers temporarily displaced by this loss of livelihood, the Canadian government offered them a compensation package.

### **Resources more vulnerable now**

However, this measure does not seem to have worked. Recent scientific analysis shows that the stock of Northern cod is still dwindling.

Worse, whatever was left had migrated beyond the traditional fishing grounds to warmer, deeper waters on the shelf of the Grand Banks, outside Canada's 200-mile fishing zone. The implication is disturbing: the remaining resource is now even more vulnerable to rampant and

uncontrolled fishing. Clearly, much of the present predicament stems from foolhardy old *ways of harvesting nature's 'bounty'*.

**A**l Chaddock of the Oceans Institute of Canada recounts the words of a rich fisherman: "Dollars grow faster than fish. In this age of high-tech aqua-business, fishing companies have to act more like major diversified corpora-dons than like natural resource-based subsistence industries."

But the consequences are devastating. "This man is now indeed very rich and very powerful," continues Chaddock, "but the fishery he raped is nearly dead and the fisher people he abused are destitute and in the process of becoming urban refugees."

Some of the problems are apparently beyond Canadian control. Says Jon Lien of Fisheries Resource Conservation Council of Canada, "Canadian scientists and managers have indicated that inadequately controlled fishing practices on the Nose and Tail of the Grand Banks, which lie outside Canadian jurisdiction, must become consistent with management within its national jurisdiction if the present crisis facing straddling groundfish stocks is to be resolved."

There are also those who believe Canada should first set its own house in order. Says Bernard Martin of Fishers Organized for Revitalization of Communities and Ecosystems, "Canada cannot self-righteously lecture other nations about the effects of high-seas overfishing. Canadian fisheries management since 1977 has been a monumental failure, characterised by the development of a huge offshore dragger fleet and by give-aways of huge chunks of the resource to large corporations."

The tragedy of Fogo Island is shared by hundreds of other fishing communities dotted all along the northeast coast of Newfoundland and Labrador, once one of the world's richest fishing grounds. Solely dependent on fishing, these fisherfolk have no other skills to let them enter new professions. The collapse of

their traditional fishery means they have to either walk away from all they have ever had, to face an uncertain future in other areas or stay back and try to survive on government hand-outs and social programmes.

The only apparent solution to the problem is a drastic one. This was articulated by Bernadette Dwyer in a statement to the UN Conference on Straddling Fish Stocks and Highly Migratory Fish Stocks in July 1993.

#### **Emergency measures**

Endorsed by the United Nations Association of Canada, this called for "an emergency measure imposing a temporary suspension of fishing of all threatened species, in the area adjacent to and beyond Canada's 200-mile zone."

It added, "We all recognize that time is of the essence. Uncontrolled fishing and in-effective management regimes on the high seas can not continue. Such irresponsible fishing practices of highly mobile fleets spells the death knell for coastal communities whose heritage and future are dependent on the fishery." ■

This article is based on statements by Bernadette Dwyer, Al Chaddock, Jon Lien and Berndr Martin of Canada