

## Looking out for the future

A recent conference held in Anchorage, Alaska, focused on the future of Alaska's small fishing communities

Alaska may be the 49th State in the United States of America (US), but its geographic isolation, cultural diversity and residents' dependence on fish and wildlife resources make it unlike any other State in the US. From coastal communities bordering Canada, north, to communities above the Arctic Circle, subsistence and commercial fishing are the backbone of the rural economy in Alaska. In many ways, Alaskans strongly relate to people in the Arctic and developing nations who are heavily dependent on fish and wildlife resources for economic and subsistence purposes.

A two-day conference recently held in Anchorage, Alaska, titled "Alaska's Fishing Communities: Harvesting the Future," focused on how fishermen, community residents, local governments and other stakeholders could work together to ensure that this vibrant fishing economy continues for future generations.

Over 150 Alaskans from 29 communities travelled to Anchorage (mostly by airplane, as Anchorage cannot be reached by road from most of the represented communities) to participate in the discussions.

Chandrika Sharma, Executive Secretary of the International Collective in Support of Fishworkers (ICSF), provided the keynote address at the invitation of the conference steering committee, which comprised representatives from government, universities, industry and non-profit organizations.

The most surprising aspect of her presentation, "*Rural Communities in a Global Marketplace: Can Fisheries be a Part of Community Sustainability?*", was the degree of commonality between issues

facing fishing peoples from across the globe and those from Alaskan fishing communities.

Alaska is the only US State located in the Arctic. It is 1,482,970 sq km in area, about half the size of India, with 10,686 km of coastline. About 660,000 people live in Alaska, 18 per cent of whom represent 11 distinct Alaska Native cultures. Approximately half of all Alaskans live in the urban centre of Anchorage. The remainder of the population lives in the smaller cities of Juneau and Fairbanks, or in one of over 80 geographically isolated towns and villages from Ketchikan in the southeast, to Barrow above the Arctic Circle. While natural resources provide a vital source of food in these rural villages, the cost of energy to heat homes, provide electricity and fuel transportation to access nearby resources are often the primary issue for these communities. Fuel costs in these villages are often four times higher than in urban Alaska.

Fisheries, both subsistence and commercial, is the largest private employer in the State and a major economic force. Statewide, Alaskans eat over 650 kg of wild fish and wildlife per person annually. Commercial fishing (ex-vessel value) in Alaska is valued at over US\$1 bn per year, the majority of which is generated by salmon, crab, halibut, cod, pollock and other groundfish fisheries. The wild salmon fishery, in which thousands of Alaskans participate each year, was valued at over US\$300 mn in 2006, with a harvest of 140 million salmon. Five species of Alaska salmon are harvested in 26 different areas of the State.

### Primary focus

A primary focus of the conference was on ways to retain access to fish resources by local community residents and future

generations. Alaska's fisheries are regulated by either the State of Alaska and/or federal law, since fish harvested beyond three miles of the coastline are considered "federal" or owned by the American public.

**A**s a result, while federal law mandates that impacts on fishing communities are considered during the development of management regulations, the State of Alaska's Constitution mandates that no preference be given to specific individuals, groups or communities in State-managed fisheries. A number of quota share programmes have been developed in the federal system, while the State manages access primarily using a licence limitation system, in which licences are transferred among fishermen on the open market. This dual management system in Alaska's waters can be both confusing and contradictory.

Fisheries managers in both of these systems have recognized a drain on locally owned access over the last few decades. At the same time, the value of access privileges has increased significantly, making it more difficult for young people to start a fishing business. Recognizing that loss of community-based access is equivalent to seeing a small local business shut shop, local community and tribal governments have recently focused on how to provide

for long-term access within the community.

Two broad approaches to providing for continued fisheries access by communities were addressed during the conference. These included: (i) direct provisions or programmes implemented by the government; and (ii) increased education and tools that enable retiring fishing business owners to transfer their assets within the community. Quota share and licence-based systems were specifically addressed under the first approach, as many participants recognized that the value of quota share or licences has increased dramatically over time, making it more difficult for a person to enter the fishery. It was noted that including communities in a share-based system should be done during the development of the initial programme, such that the increased price of entry does not preclude the purchase or use of community shares in the future (see Box). Limited duration of quota share, as opposed to granting shares in perpetuity, might also allow managers to adjust a programme periodically, to ensure that community access and other potential goals have been reached.

Education and creative financing were the primary examples of the second approach to supporting continued community access to fishing privileges. Bruce Jones, City Manager of Petersburg, Alaska, noted that his community was looking at ways to educate young people about opportunities in fishing, and how to develop a business plan to buy into a fishing business.

In addition, there are financial tools and support services available to help fishing business owners transfer their assets upon retirement. Linda Behnken of Sitka, and Eric Rosvold of Petersburg, both brought forth ideas on how to ensure that crew members were able to use their experience to buy into eventual ownership of a fishing business.

#### **Expanded participation**

Behnken advocated the design of management systems that "focused on fostering sustained or expanded participation by independent community-based fishermen." She noted

## Community Quota Programme

- The existing halibut and sablefish IFQ programme was implemented in 1995; quota share (QS) for use on catcher vessels was primarily limited to individuals who must be on board the vessel.
- Since implementation, much of the QS has been consolidated, and an out-migration of QS has been realized by smaller, rural communities.
- The Community Quota Programme (CQP) amended the IFQ programme in 2004.
- The CQP allows 42 eligible communities on the Gulf of Alaska coast to form non-profit entities to purchase, hold and manage catcher vessel QS.
- The purchased QS generates an IFQ permit, which authorizes the holder to fish a specified number of pounds of fish in the area.

that owner-on-board provisions are essential to this design, to ensure that resident fishermen continue to be tied to the harvest of the resource.

A substantial portion of the conference was spent in small group discussions with coastal residents, fishermen and fisheries managers. These discussions highlighted a common need for community residents to work together at the local level to define fisheries goals for their community, thus creating a 'bottom-up' management system. In Alaska, while many issues are shared across the State, the broad cultural, geographic and resource differences make it impossible to implement a 'one-size-fits-all' approach. Instead, participants focused on methods that could be used to identify the primary priorities, opportunities and assets within a community, to develop a plan to address and implement a community's goals. The needs of fishermen, crew members, processing workers, small support businesses and local governments should be well represented and taken into account during this process.

Both the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), and the Code

of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) talk about the need for recognition of the economic needs of coastal communities and the need for preferential access to traditional fishing grounds. Many conference participants expressed a desire to put in place management systems and approaches that recognize the importance of resource access to small-scale fishing communities, and a need to ensure that these communities are an integral part of the management and decision-making processes. We in Alaska are also taking responsibility for considering small coastal communities in the development of local and national fisheries policies.

More information on the conference can be found at its website at <http://seagrant.uaaf.edu/conferences/fish-com2/agenda.html>, which has links to most of the presentations made. Another similar conference is planned for early 2008.

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