

Angling for disaster

The growing power of sport fishing presents a bleak future for small-scale fishers in the West

Discussions about small-scale fishers are commonly driven by the perspectives of less developed countries and are analyzed through formulations such as East vs West, capital-intensive vs small-scale, community-based, and private vs public/community property.

This approach, however, ignores the fact that small-scale fisheries dominates the fishing industries of many Western countries such as Australia, the US and Canada, amongst others, at least in terms of employment. In Australia, for instance, registered fishing vessels under 10 m in length far outnumber those considered large (over 24 m).

The participants in these small-scale fisheries tend to be family businesses, often multigenerational and characterized by low levels of both capital investment and profitability. These fisheries face many of the same issues as their Eastern counterparts such as poor fisheries management, competition from larger players, and habitat degradation. Although the issue of access alienation has cropped up in some of the Eastern fisheries, Western small-scale fisheries are facing a major assault on their abilities to access fish resources, primarily due to the increasingly influential recreational angling (sport fishing) sector.

Major fishing closures resulting from political agitation by numerically dominant and, commonly, well-funded angling groups have resulted in uncertainty, stress and unemployment in coastal fishing communities, as governments seek to appease the recreational sector.

For many of these small fishing communities, the debate over property

rights has assumed greater validity as they seek to preserve their way of life and their ability to earn a living. The downside of property rights are increasingly being juxtaposed against the possibility of extinction.

For generations, recreational anglers have sought sole access to many inshore fish stocks. The larger area and greater time closures for the commercial sector reflect the previously held view of many fishery administrators that recreational fishing was harmless and, therefore, could be allowed to continue relatively unchecked, while the more important need of controlling commercial catches was addressed.

If we ignore the (probably significant) impacts of habitat loss and pollution on these inshore areas, there is mounting evidence that recreational catches (and bycatches) have a major impact on inshore fish stocks in many areas. Recreational fisheries are not immune from bycatch either. Discarding rates can be of commercial-sector proportions. Protected species are often taken; hooking mortality can be high; and habitat modification occurs from intensive boating — these are some of the more obvious impacts of angling.

The rise of recreational catches has been driven by a mix of technology and increased leisure time. More reliable outboard engines, cheaper (and better) fish finders and, more seriously, the advent of cheap Global Positioning System (GPS) devices have put commercial-sector fishing power into the hands of millions of anglers.

Slow to realize

Fisheries administrators have generally been slow to recognize this threat. They

also face handicaps, such as limited access, for any effective control. A failure to address the burgeoning recreational catch has resulted in resource conflict and demands for politically driven resource reallocation solutions.

Even as recreational fishers move further offshore and begin taking larger quantities of deeper water species traditionally thought of as being limited to the commercial sector, there is a reluctance by fisheries administrators to act to limit recreational catches.

The recreational sector makes use of lines as the dominant means of fishing, while the most common commercial sector gear is the net. What better way to limit the catching power of the commercial sector than to campaign for net bans?

In the southern US, a number of States have banned the use of nets as a result of pressure by sport-fishing interests. A number of other States have been subject to major anti-net campaigns. In Florida, around 5,000 small-scale commercial fishers were put out of business by a vote to ban nets. The vote was preceded by a major television campaign against nets that the small-scale fishers were unable to counter, for lack of funds. Although government funds were made available to buy back the nets (thus providing some limited 'compensation'), the sport-fishing sector campaigned against such a buyout.

Since the net ban, many related businesses have closed, rendering several fishers unemployed. This has become a major issue, as many fishers were too old for other jobs, levels of education were low, and there was no exit programme to enable fishers to find alternative sources of employment. In short, the pre-voting vilification campaign made these people out to be resource rapists and unworthy of the support of the wider community.

Similar campaigns are also being waged in Australia and Canada. In Lake Macquarie, New South Wales, Australia, small-scale fishing families have been subject to five years of intense vilification by an angling group in a campaign that has caused great stress and uncertainty. This campaign has proceeded despite independent evidence that commercial

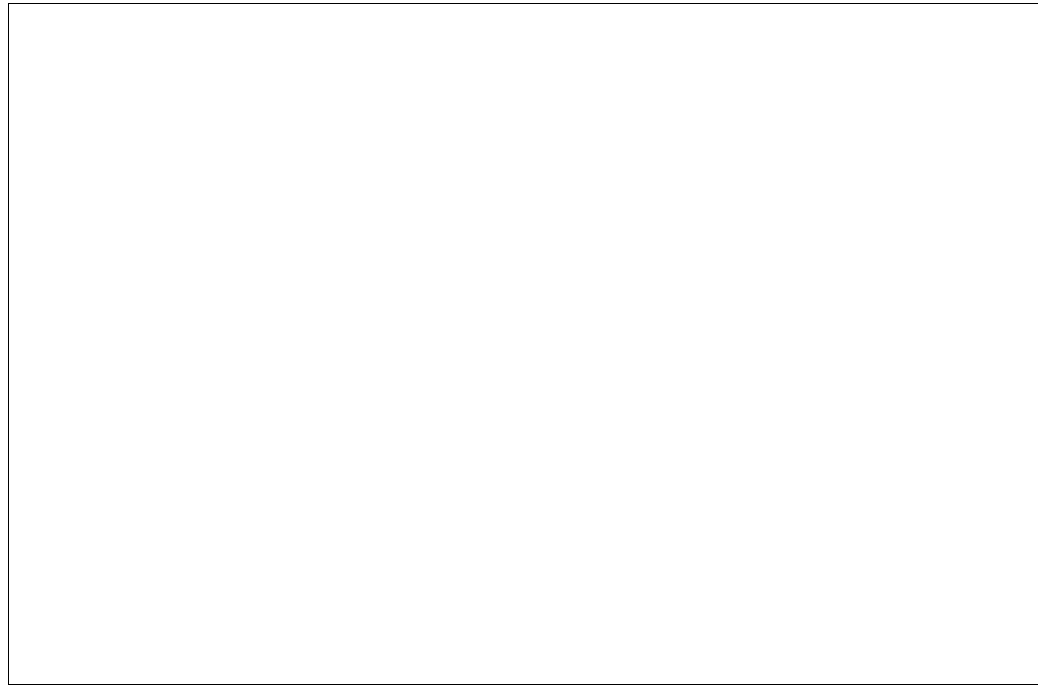
catches have been stable for decades, and recreational catches continue to increase. Moreover, as occurs elsewhere, the commercial catch is dominated by non-angling species such as mullet, and the recreational catch of many of the shared species exceeds the commercial catch.

Small-scale fishers subject to campaigns by anglers face a major dilemma. The current management/licensing systems are not based on strong property rights. Thus, there is little chance of compensation for loss of access rights. Such compensation could have been used to move into another small business, or to move elsewhere for fishing, or to undertake some retraining. Governments prefer this situation as they want the flexibility to cater to political pressure at no cost to the public, and the small size of many of these fishing communities mitigates against them forcing government to allocate funds for an exit package.

Gone are the days when fisheries administrators would provide some protection. The increasing politicization of these agencies has increased the uncertainty for small-scale commercial fishers. Not surprisingly, many of the fishing communities facing recreational fishing pressures are seeking greater security of access. Stronger access rights have their own downside. The allocation of tradeable rights, whether they be ITQs or tradeable input controls, will undoubtedly change the way fishing communities operate. Fishing communities face some hard choices—change or be phased out. However, tradeable rights systems do not exist by themselves. They are the creations of people, and can thus be designed to achieve the goals of those who design them.

Innovative ways

At the FishRights Conference held in Perth, Australia in November 1999, among the highlights were the few presentations that dealt with innovative ways of designing rights-based systems that work for, and not against, fishing communities. Although the conference was dominated by the ITQ debate, and full-fledged, corporate-orientated




property rights, it was clear that there was much to be learned from listening to smaller groups that were designing rights-based systems that, while far from perfect in an economic sense, provided increased security and additional management tools.

Community ownership may provide a halfway house between individual and public ownership, and may thus provide some of the protection required by fishers, without all of the negative consequences of full privatization.

Such a move may require some adventurous thinking and some real leadership from fisheries administrators, attributes which are not in great supply in many fisheries agencies. The incentives for such behaviour are not strong. Politicians and their appointees, and angling lobbyists, would not want strong rights for the commercial sector, as they have no vested interest in the survival of small-scale fishers. Fishing communities, however, do. There is thus a major challenge to ensure the continuation of these communities.

The strengthening of rights will cause changes in the ways these communities function. However, as the pressure on coastal resources increases, and the threat of extinction of these communities becomes ever present, the palatability of

these changes may also change. Even if stronger rights do not become the key to survival, they may at least tip the balance at the bargaining table when the reallocation axe falls. 

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