

The arrogance of experts

This piece on the Marine Stewardship Council and the lobster fishermen of Brazil is in response to an article in *SAMUDRA Report* No. 29

The August 2001 edition of *SAMUDRA Report* carried a 'pre-assessment report' of the Prainha Brazil lobster, prepared by Chet Chaffee who is with a group called Scientific Certification Systems, based in California.

I was so furious with the report that I wrote Sebastian Mathew of ICSF who encouraged me to put my thoughts down for the next issue of *SAMUDRA Report*. What follows is really no more than a 'Letter to the Editor'. I have never been to Brazil nor have I ever met anybody associated with the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC).

Mr. Chaffee begins his report by telling us the MSC is "now a fully independent organization", independent supposedly from Unilever and the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), but later in the article we find that the WWF is indeed paying for the report. In any case, even if the MSC is fully independent, who are they?

According to Chaffee the Draft Principles and Criteria for Sustainable Fisheries was produced by "20 eminent persons". He talks of a panel of "scientific, economic, and fishery experts." There is no mention of fishermen representatives or unions. How incredibly arrogant! Mr. Chaffee's own Scientific Certification Systems has a multi-disciplinary team of scientists. We are supposed to be overwhelmed by all this science and expertise! But I still wonder, who is the MSC and who are they to be going to coastal Brazil to certify anything?

Consider Mr Chaffee's assessment of the lobster fishery itself. Nowhere in the article do we find evidence to suggest that the Prainha lobster is just one small component of a much larger discrete stock. Yet, the fact that the general trend in lobster landings is declining in Brazil as

a whole seems to be the fundamental reason for ceasing the assessment. Much is made of the increased effort since 1965, and the commensurate decline in 1979 and beyond.

Yet, there is not one shred of evidence to suggest that the increased effort is a threat to the sustainability of the resource. Apparently, we are supposed to be impressed by the dramatically lowered catch rate, even though the next paragraph asserts an expanding number of boats and gear, something that would reduce the catch rate per trap but tell us nothing of the state of the resource.

In the lobster fishery of the Maritime Provinces of the East Coast of Canada, we have 41 lobster management zones. There is wide consensus that lobster should be managed locally and there is absolutely no data to determine what constitutes a discrete stock; the Fisheries Resource Conservation Council has hypothesized that there may be lobster production areas that are larger than a given management zone, but stresses that lobster should be managed locally, while admittedly taking into account measures for the whole production area.

Our lobster fishery was commercialized in the late 1800s and catches peaked some 15 years later and declined throughout the 20th century to a level where landings were a third of the historical highs.

Declining catches

In the late 1970s, landings began increasing and, in 1990, reached levels comparable to the turn of the century. Now they are declining again, as one might expect. We have lots of science and enforcement but absolutely no reason to believe the declines in some areas will not continue, while in others they are

increasing. There is no one out there who has the secret to reverse the trends and there is virtually no correlation between so-called effort and resource sustainability.

This is because, in my judgement, we use a 'passive' form of fixed gear fishing combined with basic protection of the berried females and the immature lobsters. In this type of management fishery, effort is almost invariably a competitive act towards the other participants and not really a determinant of resource decline or expansion.

My guess would be that if Prainha successfully implements its local management measures, the lobster fishermen will most certainly see benefits in future years, regardless of what the rest of the coast is doing; but other parts may 'bloom' for no detectable reason, while Prainha just plods along.

Notwithstanding the optimistic views of René Sharer in a compendium article, I am outraged by Mr. Chaffee and his cohorts in MSC and WWF, with their pompous scientific jargon about sustainability, when they can't even enlighten us on the relation between Prainha and the rest of Brazil's lobster stock. §

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