

North America/ Canada

Are Women Martians?

Excerpted from an article by Arielia Pahike working with the Nova Scotia Women's FishNet. It has been reproduced from Coastal Community News Volume 6, Issue 6, July/ August 2001, a newsletter brought out by the Coastal Community Network, Nova Scotia, Canada

I recently attended a Department of Fisheries and Oceans (DFO) consultation in Moncton—about fisheries management in Atlantic Canada. I was there with Mary DesRoches, representing the Nova Scotia Women's FishNet. Our presentation covered issues in a DFO discussion document that would affect women in coastal communities and women employed in the fishery. After our presentation and many others, a representative of a New Brunswick druggers' association delivered a heated stream of negative comments. He ended with an outburst of anger that was apparently brought on by our presentation: "And then," he sputtered, while a woman's voice in our headphones politely attempted to simultaneously translate his frustration, "And then, there are some people who think that women - women! - should sit at the decision-making table. Well, if this is the case, we might as well invite the Martians to have a seat as well!"

Later in the discussion, we were talking about the economic and social viability of the fishery and how the term 'stakeholders' should be defined. Mary and I both said that anyone who is directly or indirectly affected by the fishery, or who has a historical attachment to it, should be involved in policy decisions. We added that this would obviously include women, who are key stakeholders in the sustainability of coastal communities and fishing families, and who have always participated in many aspects of the fishery. We were then told by a member of DFO's Policy Review Committee that he was now aware of our opinions, but that DFO was proposing something different in its discussion document.

At that point, I seriously considered leaving the room to take a quick drive down to the local costume shop for a 'Martian' outfit. I would then return to ask the same question, as a Martian representing Martians, and suggesting that Martians are also stakeholders and so

should have a say in fisheries policy. After all, I'd tell the meeting, Martians could have a lot to gain if the fishery continues to be privatized and professionalized. In future, when inter-planetary travel becomes easier, Martians might well want to buy some boats and quota, enroll in some training and safety workshops, and head out to make some money. We might even give the Martians some seed money, if they promised to buy a lot of quota and hire a small percentage of local earthlings for a few months to show them the ropes.

Needless to say, I didn't leave and then return as a Martian. But I do think that within this consultation framework, a Martian might quite rightly have been given the same response Mary and I received: "Thank you for your opinion, but we are not proposing that Martians have a significant role at this point in time." Which leads me to the question: Are women and Martians, in fact, similar? I know that I don't think we are, and I know that most women, and many friends and families of women, don't think we are, but what about the general opinion, the status quo, the majority, the "average Joe"? What about the average politician or bureaucrat?

This question only becomes really interesting when we consider what the answer's consequences are. I suppose that if women are like Martians, we might not need to be treated as humans or be given similar opportunities as men. This could save the government

a lot of money. We, as a nation, could certainly save on Employment Insurance, training, salaries, health care, and education. We could simply ensure that every woman/Martian got paired off with a husband, and as long as he was well looked after, she/it wouldn't starve, and might even have a nice life. On the other hand, if women are humans, we might want jobs and we would probably want to make some decisions about what's best for our families, our communities, and ourselves. We might even get together and brainstorm about how we could influence policies that were unfair to women and fishing families, or that were detrimental to community sustainability. Now and then, you might even see a woman presenting some of these ideas at a policy consultation.

But before I get too far ahead of myself, getting into details about how women in coastal communities are affected by fisheries policies,

Employment Insurance regulations, or the accessibility of training programmes, and before I outline any of the ideas or solutions that women have proposed to build community sustainability and social and economic development, we need to ensure that the framework exists for women to be acknowledged as full and equal participants and decision makers in our communities. What is frightfully depressing is that we don't yet seem to be in agreement about the basic fact that needs to be understood before we can go any further—the fact that women are not like Martians.

Perhaps, if we can all agree to this, we'll start to see the need for some changes. In Nova Scotia's coastal communities today, many women are not given the same opportunities as men. Women's work, both paid and unpaid, must be recognized as contributing to the economic stability of our communities. Women's voices must be considered as relevant and important when we are exploring solutions to the many challenges our communities face.

Because it was at a DFO policy consultation that I was forced to question my identity as a human being, I will end by throwing the resulting questions back out for the consideration of our government representatives: Who are you representing? Are you representing equally both men's and women's concerns? What is guiding you to represent an industry as a closed circuit of "professionals" and corporations rather than as environments, communities, and the people really affected by the fisheries? Also, who are you willing to discuss these questions with, and how will you consider all the different points of view seriously? I hope we can answer some of these most basic questions soon, so we can start working together to discover solutions to some of the more interesting and meaningful challenges facing our coastal communities.

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