CANADA'S ATLANTIC FISHERY:
Forging Stability in a Sea of Change

BY Pat Chamut

THE FISHERY HAS LONG BEEN A CENTRAL ELEMENT OF THE HISTORICAL, ECONOMIC AND CULTURAL LIFE OF CANADA'S EAST COAST, PROVIDING THE ACTIVITY AROUND WHICH SOME OF CANADA'S OLDEST AND MOST UNIQUE COMMUNITIES HAVE GROWN AND FLOURISHED. LONG BEFORE EUROPEAN CONTACT, THE FISHERY HELPED TO SUSTAIN THE ORIGINAL ABORIGINAL INHABITANTS OF THE REGION. THIS ABUNDANT FISH RESOURCE WAS ALSO ONE OF THE MAIN REASONS THAT EUROPEANS CAME TO THIS PART OF THE WORLD 500 YEARS AGO. TODAY, THE FISHERY CONTINUES TO BE THE ECONOMIC MAINSTAY OF HUNDREDS OF COASTAL COMMUNITIES ACROSS ATLANTIC CANADA, PROVIDING OVER 100,000 JOBS FOR ATLANTIC CANADIANS.

In recent years, however, the Atlantic fishery has been through some difficult times. The past decade has seen unparalleled disruption, including the collapse of groundfish stocks, the loss of harvesting and processing jobs, and the requirement for very significant government investment to help individuals and communities adjust. These highly publicized issues have created the public perception that the Atlantic fishery is a declining, or "sunset" industry.

This perception, however, is misleading. In reality, the Atlantic fishery is showing signs of adapting — and adapting well — to the changes and challenges it faces.

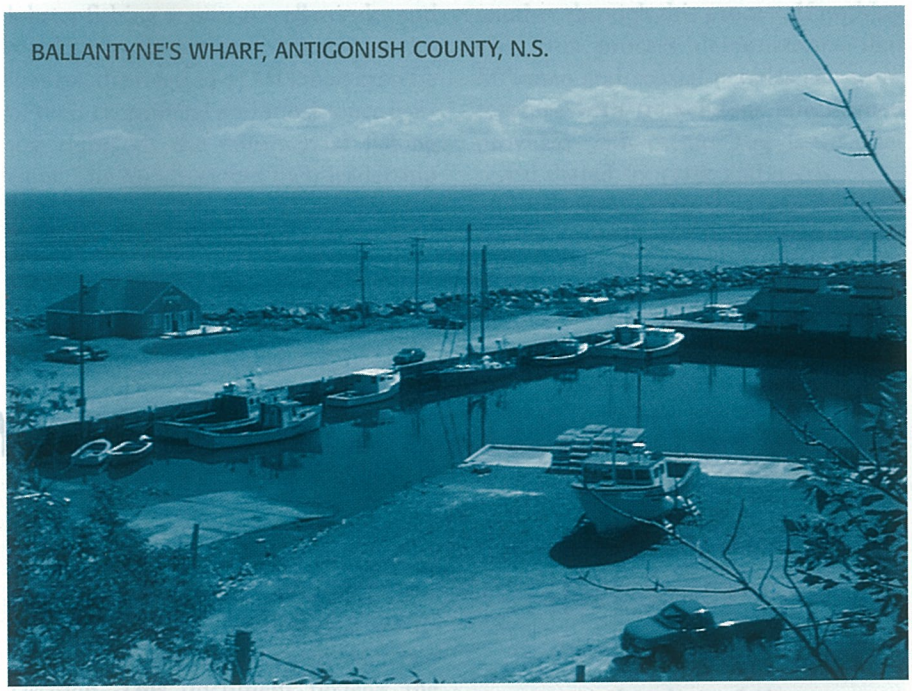
For instance, Canada's fish and seafood exports reached a record high of $4.1 billion in 2000, its third consecutive year of growth. Fishermen, too, are seeing an improvement. In the Scotia–Fundy region, for instance, the past ten years have seen an average 65 per cent improvement in their vessels' landed values, and an average 49 per cent improvement in their individual landed values.

This strong economic performance is the result of an effective combination of industry adaptation, government response, and the inherent productivity of our Atlantic coastal waters.

ADAPTING TO CHANGE: INDUSTRY

Industry is responding to the challenges it faces in many ways. For instance, through a voluntary licence retirement program, industry has worked with the federal government to better match the number of fishermen to the resources available. The result is that the Atlantic fishery is smaller, but more productive, with the supply more in line with the available capacity.

Also, the species now being harvested are more varied than ever before; fishermen are discovering the strength in diversifying their catches. While groundfish stocks such as cod have been in decline, shellfish such as lobster and shrimp are now on the increase, resulting in some record landings throughout Atlantic Canada. In Newfoundland, for instance, the harvest of shrimp has gone from under 20,000 tonnes to over 66,000 tonnes over the last decade. The total value of landings in the Gulf Region was $326 million in 1999 — exactly double that of 1990 — including the record-breaking landed value of $188 million for lobster that year.


BALLANTYNE'S WHARF, ANTIGONISH COUNTY, N.S.

New and emerging species such as sea urchins and jonah crab are also being harvested. In fact, the sheer diversity of available species means that fishermen are now able to harvest a number of different species throughout the year, giving them the flexibility they need to target species depending on conservation arrangements and each stock's availability.

Science and technology are also having a positive impact on the industry. New gear technology — specially designed nets and hooks, for instance — is helping fishermen to fish more selectively and catch only those fish species and sizes they are authorized to catch. Science is also playing a key role in the development of a sustainable aquaculture industry in Canada. Through the farming of finfish, shellfish and aquatic plants, this vibrant, young industry is providing well-needed jobs and opportunities in rural and coastal areas of the country — many of which have been hit hard by the downturns in key stocks.

ADAPTING TO CHANGE: GOVERNMENT

As the federal department responsible for managing Canada's fisheries, Fisheries and Oceans Canada (DFO) must also adapt to these challenges. DFO's job is to create a climate that will help this important industry forge stability in the sea of change in which the Atlantic fishery finds itself. The department's policies and programs must reflect — and be responsive to — the present and future needs of the evolving Atlantic fishery.

In Atlantic Canada, the department manages close to 150 fisheries, comprising thousands of different stocks. Like industry, the federal government's top priority for the Atlantic fishery is also conservation — or ensuring that future generations are able to benefit from this valuable resource as we have. Quite simply, a balance must be struck between the short-term economic and social benefits of harvesting a valuable natural resource like fish, and the need to protect that resource over the long term. As the decline of some historically valuable stocks in the 1990s so plainly proved, fish populations are complex systems that respond to environmental change, human activity, and other factors in uncertain and variable ways. A strong, conservation-based fisheries management regime has never been as important as it is today.

Each year, DFO scientists assess the size and health of hundreds of different fish stocks to determine conservation measures, including an acceptable annual catch for most species. Using this scientific advice as a basis, DFO's fisheries management team works closely with industry to establish the guidelines and conditions for harvesting. To monitor and enforce these rules, DFO's Fishery Officers conduct monitoring and surveillance activities, as well as enforcement, in cases where the rules of the fishery are not being followed.

DFO's commitment to conservation extends beyond Canada's borders. Canada has played a leading role in negotiating the United Nations Agreement on Straddling and Highly Migratory Fish Stocks, an international effort to manage and conserve fragile fish stocks on the high seas. Canada is also a key member of the Northwest Atlantic Fisheries Organization (NAFO), which regulates the Atlantic fisheries outside of Canada's 200-mile limit in the Northwest Atlantic. Along with the European Union, Canada regularly conducts surveillance and inspections in these fisheries, to ensure compliance with NAFO's conservation and enforcement measures.

These initiatives, as well as Canada's ongoing participation in other multinational forums, are providing excellent opportunities to build international support for the principles of conservation and sustainable use on a worldwide scale.

DFO's job is to create a climate that will help this important industry forge stability in the sea of change in which the Atlantic fishery finds itself.

But this commitment to conservation begins at home; and it must be a shared commitment. To strengthen this shared commitment, the department is finding ways to more closely involve those people with a stake in the fishery in the decisions that affect them. Obviously, the economic well-being of entire Atlantic communities is linked to the fishery's strength. As world demand for seafood soars — and the number of people wanting access to this resource rises — DFO needs to work closely with fishery stakeholders, at all levels, to ensure that our fisheries are managed wisely, responsibly and inclusively. Fishermen, industry, Aboriginal communities and all levels of government must each be involved in the process.

Working with all of these groups, the department is finding ways to make progress towards a co-managed fishery that is environmentally responsible, economically viable and more self-reliant. Canada's fishing industry has long played a role in aquatic resource management and fisheries science. DFO has also worked with fishing communities all over Canada to develop fisheries co-management agreements, through which, for instance, industry participates in the decision-making process for a range of species.

An important milestone for Canada's fishing industry was the Code of Conduct for Responsible Fishing Operations. An industry-led initiative, the Code sets out the terms, principles and standards by which Canada's fishing industry will conduct its operations. The Code has now been ratified by over 80 per cent of Canada's fishing industry.

Aboriginal communities also figure prominently in Canada's fisheries. Across Canada, more than 200 First Nations fish for food, social and ceremonial purposes; many participate in the commercial fishery. Many have signed formal agreements with the Government of Canada that provide for shared responsibility for a range of fisheries management activities, including monitoring and enforcement, stock assessment, habitat rehabilitation and catch reporting.

Canada is blessed with having some of the most productive fisheries grounds anywhere in the world. This natural asset has become a part of our collective heritage. With wise management, it can continue to sustain Atlantic Canadians

Recently, the Supreme Court of Canada's 1999 *Marshall* decision affirmed a 240-year-old Treaty right for Mi'kmaq and Maliseet communities in Atlantic Canada to hunt, fish and gather in pursuit of a moderate livelihood. Since the decision, DFO has initiated significant changes in the Atlantic fishery. First Nations now enjoy greater access to the Atlantic commercial fishery than ever before, and their participation is expected to increase as they acquire greater fishing skills and capacity.

ATLANTIC FISHERIES POLICY REVIEW (AFPR)

To define the terms by which the evolution of the Atlantic fishery should continue, DFO is engaged in a comprehensive review of the policies and rules governing it. The Atlantic Fisheries Policy Review (AFPR) is the first such review in over two decades. The AFPR's goal is to bring DFO's fisheries management program into line with today's realities and stakeholder demands, and put in place a policy framework that will support the long-term sustainable management of the Atlantic fishery.

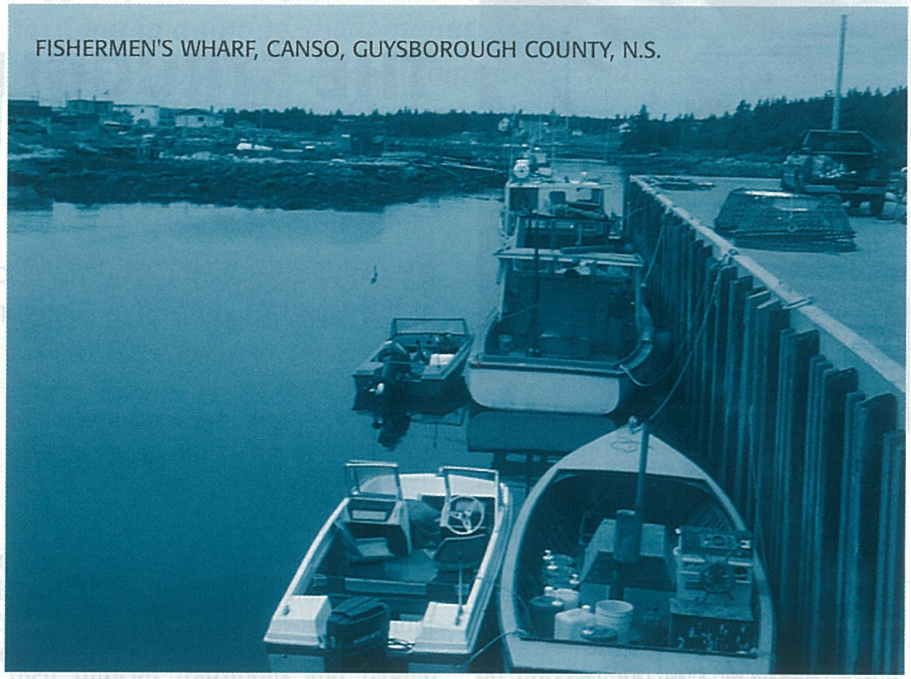
The review is being conducted in two phases. The first phase, currently underway, focuses on developing the required direction, objectives and principles, and incorporating these into a single policy framework. This phase also involves a number of public and industry consultations, to identify concerns and find ways to reflect these concerns in the framework being developed. The second phase of the AFPR process will involve putting the key elements of the framework into operation.

Public discussions around the many topics affecting the Atlantic fishery are contributing to the development of a comprehensive and inclusive framework that will guide our Atlantic fishery in the years ahead, and bring some well-needed stability and foresight to this key Canadian industry.

THE WAY AHEAD

Canada is blessed with having some of the most productive fisheries grounds anywhere in the world. This natural asset has become a part of our collective heritage. With wise management, it can continue to sustain Atlantic Canadians and our communities for generations to come.

To protect this rich natural resource in the future, DFO will continue to work closely with industry to manage the delicate balance between the present growth and competitiveness of the Atlantic fishery, and its long-term survival. The responsible, conservation-based harvesting strategies the department is developing and implementing — along with initiatives like the Code of Conduct for Responsible Fishing Operations and the Atlantic Fisheries Policy Review — will be instrumental in building the stable, inclusive and forward-looking Atlantic fishery Canada needs.



FISHERMEN'S WHARF, CANSO, GUYSBOROUGH COUNTY, N.S.

Pat Chamut is Assistant Deputy Minister, Fisheries Management at Fisheries and Oceans Canada