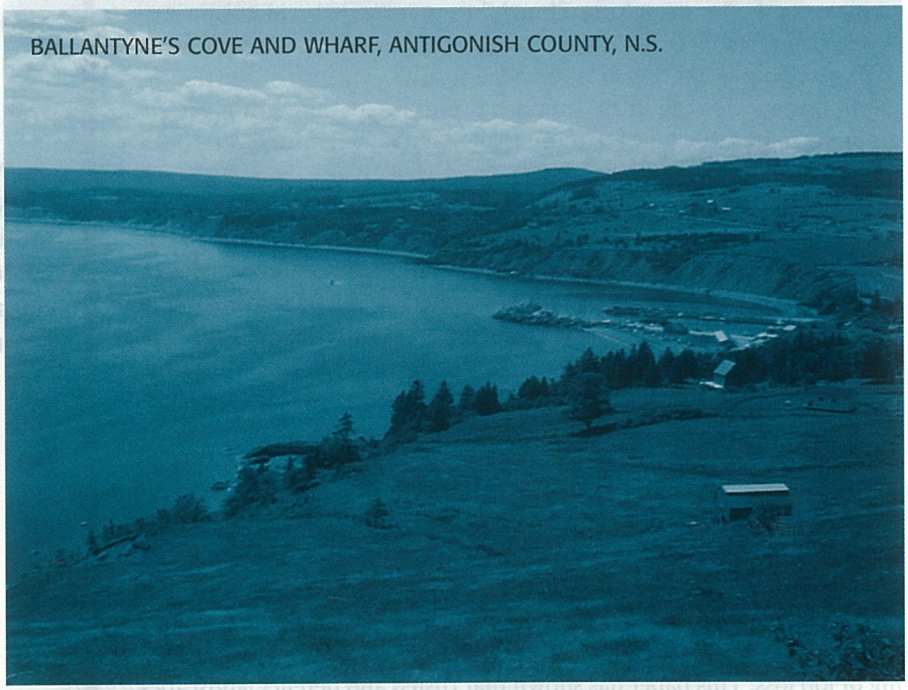
DIVING INTO the Chowder?

Social Research For Sustainable Fisheries (SRSF)
A Community-University Research Alliance

This essay has been prepared by Social Research for Sustainable Fisheries (SRSF) at St. Francis Xavier University in Antigonish, Nova Scotia

"IF FISHING WERE THE SAME AS IT WAS WHEN I STARTED, I WOULD GO INTO FISHING AGAIN; BUT, I WOULDN'T IF THE FISHERY IS THE SAME AS IT IS TODAY."

- A SMALL BOAT FISHERMAN FROM GUYSBOROUGH COUNTY, NOVA SCOTIA



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

'THE CHOWDER'

In 1998 an enterprising wit, on the occasion of Newfoundland's 500 year celebration of John Cabot's 'discovery', produced a T-shirt portraying an image of Cabot kneeling before the English king Henry VII and proclaiming *Fish?! …Couldn't Catch 'Em All If We Tried For the Next Five Hundred Years!* By 1998 the Atlantic Canadian moratorium on fishing the great Northern Cod and the closure or down-sizing of other fisheries had stripped thousands of the basis for their livelihoods, reshaped coastal community inter- and intra-family dynamics, and fuelled a massive out-migration of young men and women. Recovery remains a distant hope, with some experts suggesting that the fish may never return to their previous levels of abundance. Of course, the present crisis is but the latest catastrophic event in a sequence of resource and economic crises that have held sway over much of Atlantic Canada's fisheries through the last fifty years or so.

The region's 'new' commercial fisheries feature much smaller fleets employing a dwindling number of people engaged in the seasonal pursuit of high value resources such as shrimp, snow crab, scallops, and lobster. Requiring comparatively little 'on shore' processing, a fishery based on these resources generates considerable export earnings and incomes for vessel owners and buyers; but they sustain little by way of coastal community–based processing, employment, and economic benefits. Many communities' remaining small boat fleets are now able to work only for only three or four months in one or two limited entry and highly regulated fisheries. Once the cornerstone in coastal community life and livelihood, small boat fisheries have been transformed from full-time, multi-species based livelihoods into part-time, specialised activities dependent for their well-being on the abundance of one or two marine resources, particularly lobster.

Understandably, this set of conditions has created a pervasive sense of disruption, vulnerability, and uncertainty among many small boat fishing families throughout the region. As if intending to deepen the misery, during these times the federal government insisted that fiscal and maintenance responsibilities for small craft harbours and wharves be 'devolved' to local harbour authorities, commonly composed of small boat marine harvesters. Many, already struggling with dramatic reductions in fishing, are now also required to develop and sustain the means to maintain their harbours and wharves. To cap all of this off, Fisheries and Oceans (DFO) also instituted dramatically increased license renewal fees, particularly in the lobster

fishery. This accumulation of demands and pressures has played off of the fact that many small boat harvesters' associations do not have the capacity to represent their memberships' interests effectively and have little or no political leverage. Consequently, many have been left feeling entirely powerless and victimised. A conspiracy-minded observer might be inclined to conclude that the opportunity presented by the groundfish resource crisis was being used by the federal government and DFO to force people out of the coastal fisheries through stripping away the ability of many to achieve a viable livelihood and by removing infrastructure that is critical to sustaining community-based, small boat fisheries. Even the most rosy-eyed optimist would be forgiven for concluding that Atlantic Canada's fisheries, given the recent developments, do not offer much by way of promise for the future of community-based, small boat fisheries.

This is the broad outline of the situation into which has been mixed the September 1999 Supreme Court of Canada's *Marshall* decision. The *Marshall* decision acquitted charges of illegal fishing against a Nova Scotian status Mi'kmaq. In so doing, the Court affirmed that the Mi'kmaq had a treaty right to participate in commercial fisheries for the purpose of realising a 'moderate livelihood'. Consequently, the region's commercial fisheries are now required to somehow accommodate the Mi'kmaq as largely new entrants in an environment completely stressed by down-sizing, 'devolution', single-species dependency, social upheaval, and pervasive feelings of vulnerability and powerlessness. For the Mi'kmaq, a First Nation that has been dispossessed from access to primary resource-based livelihoods including fisheries, the *Marshall* decision represents a key piece in developing the economic foundations essential to realising successful self-governance, to improving social and economic conditions within families and communities, and to further revitalising culture, identity and language.

The small boat lobster fishery was selected by many Mi'kmaq as the initial focus for the exercise of the treaty right. This choice makes perfect sense from the Mi'kmaq perspective since the lobster fishery is the sole remaining small boat fishery that continues to offer the prospect of economic success. Predictably, initial reactions among non-Mi'kmaq to this decision were charged with emotion. The resulting threats and confrontations grabbed national and international media attention. DFO, leading the federal government's response to implementing *Marshall*, has insisted that Mi'kmaq participation be contained within the existing fisheries management system. This is an allocation management system that controls access and participation through mechanisms such as limited entry licensing and the specification of annual catch quotas for particular species and fisheries. Supposedly intended in the first instance to assure resource conservation, the evidence of collapse and crisis in other fisheries suggests that the system has not been particularly successful at achieving its purpose. Nonetheless, DFO has refused to consider any approach other than its management system as the means through which the Mi'kmaq would gain entry.

Consequently, soon after the *Marshall* decision was announced the DFO initiated a license buy-back program, with the intention of redistributing licenses purchased from non-natives to Mi'kmaq band governments. Grossly inflated prices have been offered and paid in order to attract sellers and to accumulate licenses, particularly in the lobster fishery. But Mi'kmaq access to these licenses comes with a condition. DFO requires that each Mi'kmaq band intending to participate in commercial fisheries negotiate and sign a fisheries agreement in which, among other things, the band commits to compliance with the existing fisheries management system. As an inducement and sweetener, DFO offers to provide the bands that sign with boats, equipment, funding for fisheries infrastructure and training, in addition to a specified number of limited entry commercial fishing licenses. Hundreds of millions have been earmarked for this programme. Such bounty is almost irresistibly attractive to the region's resource-short and cash-strapped Mi'kmaq band leadership. Those resisting do so mainly on the grounds that treaty rights may be compromised fatally by signing the agreements. But DFO's strategy of negotiating agreements on a band to band basis, instead of with the Mi'kmaq's regional governance bodies such as the Atlantic Policy Congress of Mi'kmaq Chiefs (APC), has eroded regional solidarities and contributed to divisions among the Mi'kmaq as some band leadership surrender to the seduction while others continue to refuse the suitor.

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'THE SPRINGBOARD' - SOCIAL RESEARCH FOR SUSTAINABLE FISHERIES

The above details key attributes of the social and political context within which the community-university alliance – Social Research for Sustainable Fisheries (SRSF) – was launched. To say the least, the situation on all fronts in contemporary small boat fisheries is charged with heated emotions and sincere concerns. It is also a situation brimming with conflict, misinformation, manipulation, and multifaceted distress. Yet some of the participants recognise that developing 'on the ground' and 'on the water' working relationships would be


CRIBBON'S POINT WHARF, ANTIGONISH COUNTY, N.S.

one essential step to resolving issues and to moving forward. In part to this end, the SRSF project arose to address several Mi'kmaq and non-native fisheries organisations' stated desire to achieve greater research literacy and capacity through the formation of linkages with university-seated expertise. SRSF partners the Gulf Nova Scotia Bonafide Fishermen's Association (GNSBFA); the Guysborough County Inshore Fishermen's Association (GCIFA) and the Mi'kmaq Fish and Wildlife Commission/Afton First Nation with social researchers seated in St. Francis Xavier University and other Atlantic Canadian universities.

The SRSF collaboration had began prior to the *Marshall* decision. It was formed in response to the opportunities offered by a new and innovative pilot programme of funding in support of applied research that had been initiated by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRCC). Titled the 'Community-University Research Alliances' (CURA), this initiative is designed to "...help organizations within communities and university institutions combine forces and tackle issues they have identified as being of common, priority concern....that will enhance mutual learning and horizontal collaboration between community organizations and universities; contribute to the social, cultural and/or economic development of communities; enrich research, teaching methods and curricula in universities, and reinforce decision-making and problem solving capacity in the community; and enhance students' education and employability through diverse opportunities to build their expertise and work-force skills in an appropriate research setting." (www.sshrc.ca/english/programinfo/grantsguide/cura.html)

SRSF was launched in January 2000, upon winning three years of SSHRCC - CURA funding. As an alliance, SRSF is governed by a Steering Committee composed of partner organization and social research representatives. Agendas, workplans, timetables, and tasks are identified and agreed to through a consensus decision-making process. One of the first substantial outcomes from this process was the development of a *Memorandum of Understanding* (MOU). All SRSF partners signed this document. This MOU details SRSF's goals, governance processes, and the broad outline of partner commitments to one and another as well as to SRSF, particularly respecting the perceived need to affirm operating principles such as transparency, inclusivity, and accountability.

Drafting a *Researcher Protocol* was another early focus and achievement. The SRSF alliance thinks it essential that all research affiliated with it be conducted in a manner that assures adherence to ethical procedures and the principles of transparency and accountability. SRSF partners also think it critical for all researchers supported through and engaged in the alliance's projects to understand their obligations and responsibilities, particularly the need to share all information gathered, to report results in a timely fashion, and to include the SRSF alliance in previews of data analyses and presentations of findings before public release and dissemination.

Another signifying early achievement was the design and launch of the SRSF website (www.stfx.ca/people/-adavis/srsf). The alliance is demonstrating its commitment to its central operating principles by employing the project website as a means through which all SRSF documents are archived in an accessible manner. As developed, the SRSF website contains copies of documents ranging from Steering Committee minutes, through workshop materials, to research instruments and reports. The website listserv is established for the purpose of providing a dynamic means through which SRSF's geographically dispersed partners can maintain mutual contact and engagement. These achievements are evidence of SRSF's commitment to a form of governance and conduct focused on realising specific and substantial outcomes that build social research capacity and understandings. While there have been several bumps in the road, SRSF has facilitated successful working relations between the partners as well as initiated a social research capacity-building process that is producing results.

'THE DIVE' – FORM, FOCUS AND SUBSTANCE

SRSF's central purpose is to build community-university capacity and linkages through interdisciplinary research workshops and social research projects. The workshops enable university researchers drawn from a variety of disciplines and traditions to engage community organization staff in a review of specific 'real world' research design and methodological attributes

and issues. University researchers are also provided with the opportunity to present their research results and to discuss the challenges of research processes. Additional research workshops are organized and run by SRSF staff and others on topics ranging from proposal writing, through working with particular software packages and statistical analyses, to preparing and presenting researched information in documentary forms.

SRSF mobilises workshop learning through the design and conduct of specific primary social research projects. Research issues are defined by the community organization partners in consultation with their membership. These issues are, then, discussed and refined within SRSF workshops, several of which have engaged researchers from throughout Atlantic Canadian universities. Once the specific research issues have been refined, attention focuses on developing appropriate research designs and methodologies. This aspect of our process engages all SRSF collaborators in a series of working seminars focused on building an understanding of the various attributes of and needs for credible and defensible social research. By consensus, documenting Mi'kmaq and small boat fisher local ecological knowledge respecting several specific fisheries became SRSF's initial focus for primary research. Various attributes of local understandings of lobster grounds, reproduction, and recruitment are the focus of research with GNSBFA and GCIFA. With the Mi'kmaq, relations with and knowledge about American Eel has been identified as the priority. While the research projects address specific issues as identified by each SRSF partner organization, all of the partners participate in the work of designing the research, of developing the research methodologies, and, where appropriate, of conducting the research. This approach and the associated experiences foster inter-partner working relations and engagements, creating a 'learning circle' of sorts to which all contribute and within which all learn.

During SRSF's first year, all of the research energy was focused on developing detailed background documents that review key attributes of the social, economic and political contexts within which the primary social research was to be seated. For instance, both GNSBFA and GCIFA gathered government and published information concerning core historical and present-day characteristics of their areas' fisheries. The data bases developed with this information provide a detailed and exhaustive review of characteristics, through time, of factors such as numbers fishing, licenses held, vessel attributes such as numbers, ages, and sizes, and landed weights and landed values by species, sector and gear types. This information has been developed into detailed background documents profiling the historical trends and current condition of the GNSBFA and GCIFA region fisheries. The Mi'kmaq partner has focused on developing a document that accomplishes two interrelated objectives. The document reviews current scientific knowledge of American Eel, including commercial fishing data and marine biology. It also profiles key features of the Mi'kmaq relation with, understandings and use of American Eel. For example, Mi'kmaq words pertaining to Eel are documented and discussed, as are Mi'kmaq concerns about the current state of American Eel populations. In all cases, the background materials are understood as 'living documents' in that new information is always being incorporated. Additionally, these documents have been developed with the understanding that they provide essential background and context that will be critical to informing the focus, design and conduct of primary social research. SRSF's second and subsequent years are focused on conducting and completing the primary social research on the issues and themes outlined above. These projects employ a variety of research designs and methodologies that have been developed through SRSF workshops and seminars. Again, this approach facilitates working relations and experiences among all of SRSF's Mi'kmaq and small boat fishing partners, while continuing the social research capacity-building processes.

In addition to these core activities, SRSF has taken a lead in facilitating dialogue between Northeastern Nova Scotian small boat fishermen and the region's Mi'kmaq. Several well attended, informal and unpublicised roundtable discussions have been held. These focused on small boat fishermen's and Mi'kmaq concerns respecting Mi'kmaq exercise of their commercial fishing treaty rights within the local lobster fishery, as well as on 'on the water' relations between small boat fishermen and the Mi'kmaq participating in the lobster fishery. By and large, these meetings fostered a civil dialogue during which the depth of the concerns felt by most became fully evident. From the small boat fishermen's perspective, the main issues were containment of Mi'kmaq participation within the existing



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lobster fishing season as well as rules and regulations, the scale of Mi'kmaq participation, the relation of Mi'kmaq exercise of their ceremonial and subsistence fishing rights to the commercial fishing right. The Mi'kmaq and their leadership expressed concerns about being assured that they would be able to exercise their rights without harassment. The Mi'kmaq and small boat fishermen decided to develop means through which communication channels would be opened and sustained, beginning with a committee that work on developing co-operative relations. But, through the course of these discussions it became apparent that considerable misinformation and misunderstanding surrounded the 'Marshall decision'. As a result, the SRSF partnership developed a document titled *Highlights of the Marshall Decision.* This document reviews the key points of the decision through the means of direct quotations drawn from the September 19th, 1999 decision as well as from the November 19th, 1999 Supreme Court of Canada (so-called) 'clarification'. It also provides additional resources concerning matters such as the meaning of treaties and sources of additional information. This document has been circulated as *SRSF Fact Sheet #1* to the membership of all SRSF partners, as well as been made available to the general public. This seemed an appropriate area in which SRSF, as Mi'kmaq-small boat fishermen organisation collaboration, was positioned to provide a modest, yet possibly useful contribution to a very difficult and potentially explosive situation.

LESSONS AND MEANINGS?

SRSF's strength and substance resides in its specific focus on developing social research capacity and on conducting research projects that arise from partner priorities. The emphasis on learning and doing through collaboration builds positive and outcomes-oriented learning experiences among the partners. These have formed the basis for both achieving SRSF's goals and for building substantial relations between the small boat fishing organisations and Mi'kmaq participants. SRSF's partners have come to know and to trust one and another through this process. If nothing else, this process demonstrates that Mi'kmaq and coastal peoples can work together with tremendous effect when provided with means and issues that reveal shared concerns and needs.

Arguably, Atlantic Canada's rich fishing grounds were the primary reason why European peoples initially colonized the region. Of course, these are the very qualities that sustained much of the Mi'kmaq culture and way of life. For almost five centuries these marine resources supported the settlement, proliferation, and sustenance of the region's hundreds of European ancestry coastal communities and coastal peoples. Certainly many fortunes have been made, although a very few of these can be traced to individuals who began by labouring in the coastal fisheries. As in most imperial and colonial systems, the lion's share of the economic benefits and wealth flowed and, it must be said, continue to flow to those who control access to markets, supplies, and resource prices. From the very outset to this day, the vast majority of those making their living from fishing have had little choice but to take the resource prices offered them at dockside by the assemblage of merchants, buyers, processors and brokers controlling access to markets. For most Atlantic Canadian coastal peoples, those actually harvesting marine resources and working in processing plants, the fishery's political economy has meant intimate personal and family relationships with economic vulnerability and, at times, grinding poverty. The social welfare state has blunted some of this political economy's sharper edges over the last forty years or so, assuring that the federal state and tax-payers bear most of the costs of maintaining the political economic structure in times of economic and resource supply crises. Nonetheless, the economic system has maintained throughout the essentials of structural inequity, economic exploitation, and wealth appropriation.

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Certainly the Mi'kmaq experiences since the coming of Europeans have been in many respects even more devastating, leaving these people among the most marginalized, excluded, and vulnerable. Nonetheless, when actually examined, Mi'kmaq and many small boat fishing communities have many common experiences and circumstances, particularly with respect to their material histories and social conditions. The experiences and outcomes of the SRSF partnership as well as the analytical capacities and information resources it marshals offer the prospect of assisting in the discovery of 'common ground' and mutual interests. Indeed, Mi'kmaq and small boat fishers are in a position to rewrite many of the basic principles of fisheries management once the 'common ground' has been transformed into the recognition of common concerns and purposes. Social research processes cast in the form of an alliance and dedicated to capacity-building offer those involved a means to dismantle dependencies and inequities and to achieve 'agency'. 'Knowledge is power' and knowledge is empowering. Social research know-how is particularly essential to confronting sources of marginalization, inequity, and vulnerability. Herein is found a 'common ground' wherein an alliance of small boat fishing peoples offers tremendous promise for achieving sustainable fisheries and fisheries livelihoods.

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