

Prince Edward Island

Cleaned Out

Women traditionally working as cleaners on oyster boats find themselves forced out of their jobs
by **Donna Lewis**

Donna Lewis is a shellfisher from Brooklyn, Prince Edward Island. She and her husband, Lloyd, work 34 acres of leased waterway on the Mill River where they fish oysters and clams. Donna is an articulate advocate and spokesperson for the rights of artisanal fishers. She is active on environmental issues, lobbying for changes in government regulations and advocating for children's rights. Donna is a regular contributor to two publications on fisheries issues.

Prince Edward Island has earned an international reputation for excellence on the world shellfish market. One species that has achieved this recognition is the Malpeque oyster.



The physical labor associated with fishing oysters is intensive. 'Tongs', which are basically two rakes, 6-14 feet in length and fastened together, are used to grapple the oysters from the ocean floor and lift them to the boat for cleaning and sorting. Every oyster must be free of spat (oyster seed), barnacles and mussels, and must be at least three inches long to be sold. This activity takes place on public fishing grounds from 1 May to 15 July and from 15 September to 1 December (weather permitting), providing a small window of opportunity for oyster fishers to make a living.

For the most part, women, often the spouses, have done the task of cleaning and sorting. To do this, they must possess a commercial fishing registration card, which costs Can\$50.00. The fisherman who owns the boat and gear either pays them a nominal fee, or, by special agreement, they earn a share of the catch. The latter is more lucrative, and not many women are paid that way.

The practice of employing a 'cleaner' has been widely accepted in the past, even though the DFO acknowledges that under Licensing and Registration Regulations 4.1, "no person shall fish for or catch and retain fish...without...a licence."

Several years ago, the federal government saw fit to reclassify and divide fishers into two groups: 'core' licences were given for species that could bring in higher incomes such as lobster, crab, scallop, and 'noncore' licences for species with a lower potential for bringing in income, such as oyster, clam, quahog, eel, etc. The price of a 'core' licence package has risen to over Can\$400,000 in recent months. This has made it difficult for those making marginal incomes to enter the more prosperous fisheries. Few 'core' licence holders are women.

To qualify as a core fisher, several criteria have to be met, including: being head of a fishing enterprise; holding a licence for a main species (lobster, crab, shrimp); being part of the fishery for a long time; and earning one's main income (more than 75 per cent) from the fishery.

The PEI Shellfish Association, an organization representing Island shellfishers, had never pressed for the enforcement of Regulation 4.1 until this past April 2000. At that time, a public meeting was called and, with approximately 200 fishers in attendance (out of a possible 2,000 license holders), a vote was held on the issue of banning 'cleaners' from the boats unless they held an oyster licence. Only oyster licence holders were permitted to vote. Those who only had commercial registrations, even though they were members of the Association, were excluded.

Jimmy A'Hearn, vice-president of the Association, fishes in one of the more popular Spring grounds in Wilmot, PEI. According to him, the number of cleaners appears to have dropped by 60 per cent since the vote took place. He also claimed that conservation was the incentive for pressing the enforcement of the existing legislation.

The dilemma facing all the women who have been displaced from the position of cleaners is that, in 1987, a moratorium was placed on new oyster licences. Speculation over the past couple of years has driven the price for a licence up to approximately Can\$10,000. To further complicate the situation, the DFO has started buying back licences in response to the Marshall Decision. In this decision, the Supreme Court of Canada has acknowledged native and aboriginal treaty rights to earn a moderate livelihood within the existing fisheries. The DFO's intent has been to buy 'core' packages that would also include oyster, clam, etc. However, in recent weeks, a third party has purchased 16 individual oyster licences at an undisclosed price. This practice has increased the price of all licences, pushing the prospect of a cleaner being able to afford a licence even farther out of reach.



The media's response to women being forced out of their traditional occupation was to print excerpts from a press release issued by the Federal Government stating, "The taking of cleaners in the boats allows licence holders to increase landings significantly, as the timeconsuming job of sorting and cleaning is performed by cleaners. While this practice was not considered a major issue for the oyster industry in the past, the PEI Shellfish Association has asked the DFO to increase enforcement of these regulations, authorizing only licensed fishers in the fishery operation."

In my opinion, one decision made by mankind in the name of conservation has dealt a fateful blow to those women continuing the struggle to survive and maintain access to fish resources in Island coastal communities.