

# The Fish Belong to the People

On a 79-minute film made in 2010 by William Hyler with the support of artisanal fishermen from a fishing port in Maine, United States

12

**T**he *Fish Belong to the People* is a nice title for a film about fishing that is original, and has been produced with the support of small-scale fishermen and several environmental non-government organizations (NGOs). The Midcoast Fishermen's Association (MFA), whose president is Glen Libby, was created in 2006 to promote the defence of deep-sea fishermen and sustainable fisheries. These deep-sea fishermen use bottom trawlers.

the coast by the Magnuson Act of 1976, which established the 200-mile zone. But the act had two consequences: the development of a largely subsidized deep-sea fleet, and the takeover of management by government authorities and scientists who marginalized the fishermen, keeping them away from decisionmaking. If we add to this the development of new fishing and navigation techniques that enabled fishermen to fish everywhere with greater precision, we can see how all the conditions occurred for a quick collapse of fishing stocks.

**...traditional fishing communities have collapsed, and the last of the Mohicans are trying to find new answers.**

The MFA fishermen acknowledge their responsibility in overfishing leading to such a collapse. Moreover, they no longer control the market, since supermarkets encourage people to shift from local fresh products to imported processed fish. Consequently, in 20 years, traditional fishing communities have collapsed, and the last of the Mohicans are trying to find new answers so as to survive and build a future for their children and consumers. They realize that the government policy favours industrial boats in the name of resource conservation.

For Glen Libby, fish is a common resource and fishermen are paid by people to bring fish they will feed on. It is but natural that they should discuss together the fishing methods used so that they can ensure a sustainable resource and environment. That does not mean that fishermen would abandon their interest in their job, which is a sense of freedom working close with nature, but it implies that the job should be done within the framework of collectively defined regulations.

The film describes with rigour, through fishermen's words, the spiral that led to the collapse of New England's fisheries. It began with motorization which allowed an uncontrolled development of trawling by Russian and European industrial boats. These boats were repelled from

## Bottom trawling

The fishermen of Port Clyde, who are MFA members, are looking for groundfish: haddock, pollock, monkfish, flounder, cod, and so on. To do so, they use bottom trawling, considered by many scientists, NGOs and other fishermen as primarily responsible for the destruction of the seabed as well as the resource.

*This review is by **Alain Le Sann** (ad.lesann@wanadoo.fr), a Member of ICSE, and President of the Lorient film festival, "Fishermen of the World"*

The fishermen have to confront greater constraints, including forbidden zones and a reduction of the number of days at sea. All this leads to empty ports. But the stocks have not increased. The restriction on bottom trawling has not led to the rebuilding of stocks, but has destroyed most of the fishing communities. Now only one per cent of the boats that used to fish along the coast, which formerly abounded with fish, remain.

The fishing zones are being increasingly reduced (to about 20 per cent of the Gulf of Maine). Meanwhile, in the fishing zones that are forbidden to them, industrial boats using midwater trawls for herring and mackerel are authorized and considered to be non-destructive. The MFA fishermen contest this point of view, saying that these midwater trawlers destroy species that serve as food to groundfish, as well as juveniles of all sorts.

Consequently, the trawlermen, have decided to focus on three different aspects to reach their goal of sustainable fishing: gear, regulations and the market. In this, they are being helped by a powerful local NGO, Island Institute, which has given them important financial support and human resources. They have developed more selective nets with square mesh and are still working to improve them. They are still asking for, unsuccessfully until now, the creation of zones managed by the fishermen, for an abandonment of the days-at-sea system, and for collective quotas. With the regulation on days at sea, fishermen have had to take more risks, and fish in rough weather, hoping to sell at a better price. To sell the fish, they have set up a co-operative which sells directly baskets of fish to restaurants and families who have placed their orders in advance.

Their community-supported fishery (CSF) is on the model of the popular community-supported agriculture (CSA). With better prices and guaranteed sales for fresh fish of good quality, the fishermen do not have to chase quantity. They also have the support of consumers for



William Hyler, director of the film, "The Fish Belong to the People", shot in a fishing village in Maine, US

their project of resource management. For them, it is the only means of preserving the last fishing grounds of artisanal communities. To highlight the quick success of the fishermen's approach, the film ends with the inauguration of the new fishing quay. The film will certainly raise a debate among those who criticize bottom trawling, but, supported by researchers, NGOs and consumers, the MFA fishermen are putting forward strong arguments to defend themselves. †

#### For more



[www.thefishbelongtothepeople.com/](http://www.thefishbelongtothepeople.com/)  
**Official Website of the Film**

[newenglandfilm.com/magazine/  
2009/09/ciff2](http://newenglandfilm.com/magazine/2009/09/ciff2)

**Q and A with the Director in  
NewEngland Film.com**

[www.pecheursdumonde.org/](http://www.pecheursdumonde.org/)  
**Third Annual International Film  
Festival "Pêcheurs du Monde"**