

# All Together

The experience of Canada's Maritime Fishermen's Union (MFU) highlights the value of a community-based approach to fisheries management

In 2004, the Maritime Fishermen's Union (MFU) owner-operator fleet, based on the Acadian coast of New Brunswick in Atlantic Canada, decided to go against the grain and venture into new, unchartered territories. The MFU fleet consisted of nearly 1,200 multi-species (lobster, herring, snow crab, mackerel, etc.) small-boat (45 feet and under in size) operators, working in mostly inshore waters and living in small, isolated rural communities often ignored by governments. Their plight had greatly improved since the establishment of a formal organization

openness to corporate control of fisheries. Thanks to strong political lobbying, led by MFU and other fishing organizations in Atlantic Canada, and thanks also to the then Fisheries Minister, Roméo Leblanc, (whose own Acadian heritage was a timely asset), that push for a 'corporate takeover' was aggressively countered, and by 2004, the fishing policy had been reversed, at least for eastern Canada.

In 2004, a fierce debate on the Atlantic Fisheries Policy Review (AFPR) led to a policy framework for the management of fisheries on Canada's Atlantic Coast, which was considered a crucial building block for small-scale fisheries in the country. The centerpiece of that strategy was an extremely valuable recognition of the fact that a fish harvester ought to be the sole owner and operator of a fishing enterprise, and that such owner-operators should remain independent of other fisheries sectors (thereby leading to the owner-operator and fleet-separation policy). That policy ensured continued benefits for a very large number of harvester-families and their communities, in contrast to the machinations of a rental fisheries owned by a few corporations.

## Controlling agreements

This new approach was a huge success for fishing organizations and set the foundations for what followed. It was also reinforced years later, in 2007, by the then Fisheries Minister, Loyola Hearn, who introduced serious economic consequences for those having attempted to circumvent the AFPR. The 2007 decision gave teeth to the owner-operator and fleet-

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in 1977, through a variety of actions that have had great impact. These actions included battles for a fair share of resource quotas for smaller inshore fleets vs larger industrial fleets, for long-term sustainability of resources (and income for the next generation) and in the form of government lobbying for basic social-safety nets. Nonetheless, in spite of progress, the bottomline incomes for fishing captains still remain very low and have certainly not risen to comparable levels of other similar trades in Canada.

In the 1980s, the fishing policy of the Canadian government was blindly influenced by the old "tragedy-of-the-commons" approach. The 1982 Kirby Commission Report had clearly demonstrated the government's

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separation policy to put a stop to 'controlling agreements', a backdoor mechanism devised by corporate fishery agents to control owner-operator fish harvesters.

At the start of the new millennium, the most important fishery for MFU fish harvesters—the lobster fishery—was undergoing a low in its natural cycle, and fish harvesters were desperate for a change that would improve their wellbeing. They were struggling to make ends meet as lobster volumes in some areas were extremely low, and other secondary fisheries were also in shambles as a result of the excesses of government protected industrial fleets during the previous generation.

In 2005, the MFU hired staff to undergo one of its most important structural changes in its 35-year-old history. Many groups of harvesters along the coast were pressuring the organization for more localized decision-making powers, or, in other words, the development of some form of a local stewardship relationship between fish harvesters and the inshore resource nearby. Some leaders in the organization were very sceptical about the realities of community stewardship, but had no better solutions to offer. Mainly, they proposed improvement of the viability of the most important lobster industry, and practical developmental projects that could be linked to fishing communities. Fish harvesters themselves were involved in the planning of projects, which generated enthusiasm and ensured viability of the projects.

The most important result of the plan was the creation of a new formal structure of communities that aimed to regroup fish harvesters in groups of 75 to 150 members, each with their own decision-making structure, with one overarching governance body. The governance body would establish a framework and basic rules for all community entities. Good communication would be crucial, and, according to the basic principles and values of MFU, meetings would have to reach the majority of the thousand and more

harvesters up and down the Acadian coast of New Brunswick.

It was decided that the planned projects and activities would include:

- A major licence retirement programme to reduce capacity and improve viability for remaining harvesters
- The introduction of local sustainability measures, mostly related to lobster
- The establishment of community economic diversification projects related to the fishery or aquaculture.

One of the most prominent of these projects was the MFU-created 'Homarus' project. Homarus specifically designed an in-house technology to protect hundreds of thousands of newly born lobster larvae from predators by raising them in a hatchery for a few weeks and releasing them immediately into the wild in proximity of their kin. The project's achievements in the enhancement of lobster resources are now world-renowned, and have been highlighted in scientific journals. Homarus would not have seen the light of day but for fish-harvester insight and support.

A report prepared in 2005 by the Canadian Council of Professional Fish Harvesters—a group established to regroup small-scale harvester organizations on a national level—



Lobster harvester, Herménégilde Robichaud, from Val-Comeau, New Brunswick with his day's catch. The most important fishery for MFU fish harvesters is the lobster fishery

MAURICE THÉRIAULT



Cap-Pelé, New Brunswick wharf on a calm Sunday morning in August. Canada's owner-operator and fleet-separation policy ensured continued benefits for small-scale harvesters

stated that over 57 per cent of Canadian fish harvesters do not have a high school diploma. It is estimated that 20 per cent of MFU members cannot read or write or are limited in their learning skills.

If, in the end, MFU has survived as an organization, it is because of its ability to stay on course for the long run. Canadian fish harvesters came to slowly understand how the changes initiated by MFU would empower them in the future. Today, resistance to community-based fishery co-management has nearly completely faded away. A community-based governance initiative was instrumental in convincing governments to become active partners in this endeavor. The new structure has permitted the implementation of lobster-conservation measures that will have a crucial impact for a robust and sustainable lobster fishery for future generations. 

#### For more

[mfu-upm.com](http://mfu-upm.com)

**Maritime Fishermen's Union**

[ccpfh-ccpp.org](http://ccpfh-ccpp.org)

**Canadian Council of Professional Fish Harvestors**

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**Fisheries Management Policies on Canada's Atlantic Coast**