
FROM NORTH AMERICA/Canada

Women in the shellfishery

by Donna Lewis, a fisher/aquaculturist from Prince Edward Island, Canada

I am a 40-year old mother of three, a fisher/aquaculturist and Director of the Prince County Shellfish Association in Mill River, Prince Edward Island (PEI), Canada. Of all the fisheries in our area, the shellfishery is one in which women have been the most involved.

My family and I have leased 34 acres of water in which we cultivate oysters and soft-shell clams. We specialize in top quality Choice Malpeque Oysters and take great pride in the success of culturing soft-shell clams — these same clams were in danger of becoming extinct in public waterways due to overfishing and contamination.

There is a public fishery (in the open seas) here which boasts many grades of oysters and mussels, and various species of clams. It is a seasonal fishery — closed for the majority of harvesters from December to April, both months inclusive. There is also a growing interest in a certain sector of the population in developing aquaculture in all of these areas to create some sense of sustainable economy within the shellfishery.

Along with this comes the risks we are now facing with large corporations investing heavily and driving down the prices to the individual harvesters. These corporations are buying up large leased areas of water (not in their own names) and collecting their own seed stock.

When the stock reaches marketable size, there will be a glut of shellfish. They will control the price and the established markets, and they will no longer have to purchase the product from the public fishers. We suspect that the price will drop dramatically even for those who do manage to grow a top quality product for which demand is high, while the rest will be forced to work for these same buyers for a minimum wage or on a commission basis.

At another level, the lack of access to timely, accurate information is causing a rift between the recreational fishers and the public, and the people who earn

their living from the sea. This is because there are many misconceptions about methods of harvest now used, i.e. mechanized harvesters, and about whether they are depleting the fishery or enhancing it.

The general public is overwhelmed with myth and rumour and has only recently begun to accept and acknowledge that the new methods of mechanized harvesting are positive, and actually nurture and help to re-establish fishing grounds previously depleted.

Women play an increasingly vital role in the public fishery, in aquaculture and in protecting shellfish environments, not only with their physical contribution, but also through advocacy for changes to legislation and education of the general population on the potential of this industry.

While the role women play is critical, this does not imply that they have not had, or that they will not continue to face, many obstacles in the path they have chosen.

There is much prejudice in almost all government Ministries involved in regulation and licensing about the physical ability and ‘knowhow’ of women to participate in the harvesting of shellfish and the operation of such basic equipment as a dory and motor.

While most seafood processors and buyers recognize the ability of these same women, they are continually challenged and harassed by government officials when income is declared. In PEI, when income is below a certain level established by the government, fishers are entitled to income supplements called Employment Insurance Benefits during the months when it is impossible to fish or find other work.

Sexist attitudes allow prejudice and assumptions to enter into the determination of applications for these benefits, which are only 50 per cent of earned income.

The government has also decided that marriage does not constitute a legal partnership—spouses must operate “within arms length” of each other and show no special favouritism when sharing equipment, fishing ground, etc.

Logistically, this makes fishing an expensive proposition for families who have to have two sets of gear,

or separate leased sites, etc. Everything has a fee. While the cost of licenses has gone up over the last couple of years, the cost of leases are expected to rise by about 600 per cent soon.

There is a generation of shellfishers in PEI who were forced to work at a very early age, giving up all opportunities for formal education and learning—earning their degrees from the school of life instead.

Many women now take leadership roles here in protecting the habitat of shellfish, creating partnerships with those who can affect change, starting local newsletters and workshops to invoke a greater understanding and appreciation of the industry, all the while participating physically and in most cases being responsible for all of the bookkeeping and reporting requirements that come with the job.

I am one such woman, but I am not alone by any means. We are very lucky here on PEI to have come to identify and realize the resources available to women in the industry.

These include resources like Cooper Institute, a non-profit research group, as well as invaluable publications, such as the Atlantic Women's Fishnet, which is written by women for women and which deals specifically with gender issues in the fishery and the accomplishment of women of fishing communities.