✖ CLOSE ARTICLE

The ChronicleHerald.ca

Published: 2007-02-22

Who gets to fish off Nova Scotia, anyway?

By Jim Meek

SEATTLE – At Seattle's seafood markets, you can buy a fish species that the northwest Atlantic no longer yields – wild salmon caught in a commercial fishery. And if you're willing to pay a premium – of up to $20 US per pound – you can take home a fillet of "king salmon" that's as long as your arm.

"King salmon" – a.k.a. Chinook – usually hails from Alaska, where fishers often land 30-pounders and occasionally harvest 100-pound beauties. And if you imagine that it's a long way from Alaska's Prudhoe Bay to southern Nova Scotia, think again.

For in many ways, the Alaska fishery has become a model of a sustainable, prosperous industry. And the principles that guide the Alaskan industry are the same ones that Canada is trying to entrench in changes to the Fisheries Act.

Understand what this means, and you're likely to figure out who will get to fish – and who will get left behind – in the evolving Nova Scotia fishery.

Inshore or small-boat fishers have already caught the scent of change, and to them it smells like five-day-old haddock that someone forgot to put on ice. That's why angry Cape Breton fishers are protesting the decision of the Department of Fisheries and Oceans to let a large Lunar Fishing trawler out of Lunenburg catch herring.

And that's why Wayne Spinney, a South Shore fisherman, has opposed the new legislation – suggesting it threatens the livelihoods of 900-plus licence holders in the lobster fishery in southwest Nova Scotia.

Here's a telling reference from DFO government background material: Under the new act, licensing agreements "could deal with such things as the scope and funding of scientific surveys and management activities."

Translation: Fishing companies and other licence holders – like Mr. Spinney – will have to bear an increasing proportion of the costs of management and scientific efforts.

Ray Hiborn, a fisheries scientist who teaches here at the University of Washington, says this idea – and the sustainability ethic – has become holy writ in some Alaska fisheries.

"Fisheries in Alaska have hired consulting companies to manage their bycatch," Hilborn told me in an interview. "The consultants monitor the catch for the fleet and the industry itself closes areas where they have high bycatches. The quota owners for Pacific cod, for instance, will voluntarily just stop fishing."

Notice that Hilborn used the word "owners" – individually held quotas have become an important concept in Canadian (and world) fisheries management.

In Alaska, Hilborn says fisheries managers have promoted economic efficiency by "changing the incentive system" through individual transferable quotas (ITQs) or other

ownership mechanisms. "Dedicated access is the phrase we use these days," Hilborn said. "It eliminates the race to fish and promotes sustainability."

The underlying principles here seem sound. Give a man access to an undetermined portion of a shared quota, and he'll fish it hard for a month. Give him ongoing access to his own fixed (and salable) quota, and he'll farm the resource for decades.

In Alaska, this approach has resulted in stable pollock, halibut, sablefish and salmon fisheries. But the economic efficiencies driving these sectors have also cost the state's economy hundreds of jobs.

In Atlantic Canada, meanwhile, it's the corporate sector – in the scallop and shrimp fisheries, for instance – that has been quickest to adopt ITQ or "dedicated access" fisheries.

Mr. Spinney's small lobster business is managed, by way of contrast, through limits on the number of traps that can be laid and the size of lobster that can be landed.

So if an Alaska-style fishery represents the future, the Atlantic Canadian corporate sector is almost there already. Small-boat herring and lobster fishers are scrambling to catch up – and worried about being squeezed out.

My advice to Mr. Spinney and his fellow licence holders – who constitute the most successful small-vessel fleet left in Canada – would be to march to the front of the parade.

This could mean paying for their own science and collectively co-operating on catch management. In short, treat the resource as if you really own it, and want to sustain it. That should result, over the long term, in a more efficient fishery.

Besides, if Alaska represents the future of the fishery, I can tell you that it tastes pretty good. At Tim's Seafood in suburban Seattle, I bought enough wild king salmon to feed four of us. It cost $30 US – and was to die for.

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