

## Lament for lost way of life in Newfoundland 15 years after cod moratorium

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A briny wind through this outpost of 900 people harks back to Newfoundland and Labrador's centuries-old cod fishery.

The bottom-dwelling fish used to be so plentiful off these shores that explorer John Cabot and his men could scoop them out from the North Atlantic with wicker baskets, according to legend.

But 15 years after Ottawa shut down the cod fishery, an industry so rooted in the province's soul that it's reflected in literature, art and song, fishermen lament a lost way of life and wonder if the stocks will ever recover to the levels they once were.

"It was the end of an era," said Bernard Martin, a fisherman of 30 years.

"The cod fishery was the most important fishery, not just for decades but for centuries. It's like a part of the fabric of Newfoundland culture. It's like farming on the Prairies."

On July 2, 1992, John Crosbie, then the federal fisheries minister, announced a moratorium on the northern cod fishery along Newfoundland's east coast. The closure, the single largest mass layoff in Canadian history, gutted the heart of rural Newfoundland and is a major factor behind the outmigration that besets the province to this day.

The moratorium was only supposed to last two years, but by the end of 1993 it was clear the cod stocks were in worse shape than many had imagined. A similar moratorium was implemented on the south coast. Nearly 40,000 people lost their livelihoods.

Crosbie's announcement sparked storms of protests in a province where many still argue at kitchen parties and on talk radio shows that it's a Newfoundlander's God-given right to fish.

"It's not my fault. I didn't take the fish out of the God damn water," he told enraged fishermen at the time.

Looking back, Crosbie says nothing has changed.

"This is astounding that this occurred and we're still not taking any fundamental steps to correct it," Crosbie said.

"In fact, it's the other way around."

He points to the federal government's decision last year to reopen a small-scale commercial and limited recreational cod fishery as one of the reasons he remains pessimistic.

"It's a wonder the cod survived at all," Crosbie said.

Just three weeks ago the Department of Fisheries and Oceans released a report warning that such a fishery could impede efforts to replenish offshore cod stocks. It also predicted that stocks could decrease by up to 22 per cent over the next three years under a limited fishery.

Federal Fisheries Minister Loyola Hearn was out of the country and unavailable for an interview, but he has insisted that there's currently enough cod to sustain such a fishery and he prefers a small annual fishing season that everyone can enjoy.

Many fishermen throughout the province support that sentiment, but it's one that bewilders many scientists.

"It's an unwise thing to do, given the circumstances," said George Rose, chairman of fisheries conservation at Memorial University's Marine Institute in St. John's.

"We have in many ways thrown in the towel and just said, 'Well, we've only got this

little bit left, we might as well fish it, we might as well just enjoy what we've got because it's never coming back."

But the collapse and recovery of the spring spawning herring in the Norwegian Sea offers hope for the cod, Rose said.

In the 1970s, Norway implemented several long-term measures, including a moratorium to protect the species. The desire to bring back the herring was so strong that scientists caught the minimum number of fish they needed for research purposes and, where possible, threw them back into the sea, Rose said.

In the mid-1990s, the stocks began to rebound.

"It took a lot of patience and dedication and protection, but it came back, and now the Norwegians are sitting pretty," Rose said.

Newfoundland's northern cod fishery can be traced back to the 16th century. On average, about 300,000 tonnes of cod was landed annually until the 1960s, when advances in technology enabled factory trawlers, many of them foreign, to take larger catches.

By 1968, landings for the fish peaked at 800,000 tonnes before a gradual decline. With the reopening of the limited cod fisheries last year, nearly 2,700 tonnes of cod were hauled in.

Today, it's estimated that offshore cod stocks are one per cent of what they were in 1977.

Rashid Sumaila, a professor at the University of British Columbia's Fisheries Centre, offers a novel, albeit controversial, solution to bring back decimated stocks that have plagued the fisheries of Newfoundland and Labrador and countries around the world.

In May, Sumaila delivered a presentation to the World Trade Organization in Geneva, calling on governments to eliminate what he considers "bad subsidies."

He defines such subsidies as funds that encourage vessels to fish more than they would in the market system, such as subsidies for fuel and boat repairs. He found that Canada gives more than \$250 million in bad subsidies.

Earle McCurdy, president of the Fish, Food and Allied Workers union, said Sumaila's idea is ludicrous and would leave many working in the fisheries industry out of work.

"These professors got lots of time to sit in the ivory tower and come up with all this stuff," McCurdy said.

"I wouldn't mind debating one of these characters some day."

Sumaila is aware his idea raises the ire of fishermen and would require unprecedented global co-operation.

But he maintains the equation is simple.

"It's about jobs and fish today versus jobs and fish today and tomorrow," he said.

Back in Petty Harbour, the crab pots signify one of the few major sources of income for fishermen now. But in a sense of *deja vu*, some in the fishing industry have raised concerns over the future of that species.

Aboard his 10.6-metre boat "The Finest Kind II," Martin said while he used to believe the cod would return, he has moved on.

"It's hard to be optimistic right now," he said.