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Sunday, April 2, 2006

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MAINE VOICES: *Priscilla M. Brooks and U. Rashid Sumaila*

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Without drastic measures, Gulf of Maine cod fishery will be lost forever

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"In Cod We Trust" was once a motto for the proud fishermen of the North Atlantic. Now, a fitting epitaph to their lost way of life could be, "In Cod We Trusted."

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Sadly, the once-rich fish populations of Georges Bank and the Gulf of Maine, which should have been wisely managed as a biological trust fund for current and future generations of New Englanders, have instead been depleted.

This has happened in the name of short-sighted economic gain, which, according to recent studies, is actually costing fishing communities millions of dollars.

In 1976, Congress passed the Fisheries Conservation and Management Act, landmark legislation to reclaim U.S. fishing

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grounds from foreign factory trawlers and guarantee that generations of New England fishermen could earn a sustainable living from local fisheries.

So why then, three decades later, are our fisheries in utter chaos? Cod and many other groundfish populations are dangerously depleted, and the region's fishing communities are crying for mercy from regulators poised to again tighten the regulatory screws.

New England's signature species, the Atlantic cod, is on the verge of collapse on Georges Bank, having fallen 25 percent in abundance since 2002 to only 10 percent of what scientists consider to be a healthy and sustainable level.

At the heart of New England's inability to maintain stable groundfish populations is a decades-long trail of poor decision-making by fishery managers often supported by our political leaders.

In a vain attempt to ease the impact on fishermen, the short-term economic interests of the fishing industry were elevated at the expense of the long-term health of the fish and the communities that depend upon them.

Instead of imposing restrictions to rebuild what were truly legendary populations of fish, managers put forth half-measures that in the end slowed but never stopped the ultimate fall of our fisheries.

Communities of fishermen, processors, boat builders, engine repairmen, fishing gear manufacturers and bait suppliers are now stretched to the limit and faltering.

As economists, we view this gross mismanagement of a public resource not just as a natural resource disaster, but also as a colossal economic failure to protect a valuable public asset. Federal regulators, charged with protecting the resource, instead liquidated it — draining the principal instead of living off the annual interest.

The saddest part is that fishery managers have known all along that rebuilding groundfish would yield great biological and economic benefits, which, if properly managed, could be sustained through time.

In fact, in the latest management plan for New England's groundfish, known as Amendment 13, scientists predict that annual groundfish landings will more than double over the 22-year rebuilding period.

Likewise, annual revenues from a rebuilt fishery would nearly

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

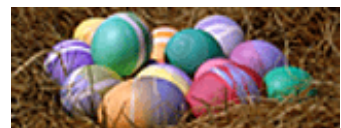
Priscilla M. Brooks, Ph.D., is a marine economist and the director of the Marine Conservation Program at the Conservation Law Foundation in Boston. U. Rashid Sumaila, Ph.D., is director of the Fisheries Economics Research Unit at the University of British Columbia Fisheries Centre in Vancouver.

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triple — soaring from \$128 million in 2003 to \$360 million in 2026.

A more recent study by economists from the University of British Columbia Fisheries Centre found that fishermen and consumers would realize nearly \$130 million more in economic benefits by restoring Georges Bank and Gulf of Maine cod.

This isn't rocket science — rebuilt fish populations will pay dividends in the form of a larger sustainable catch and associated revenues.

Unfortunately, there is no easy solution that spares further economic hardship to fishermen.

Groundfish populations are so depleted that only harsh measures can bring them back. Reliance on "input controls," such as days-at-sea restrictions, trip limits and closed areas, can not control the amount of fish caught with any certainty, and thus can no longer be tolerated.

Indeed, 30 years of groundfish management, if nothing else, has proven that such indirect measures do not work. What New England and our celebrated cod need is an enforceable program of annual catch limits that strictly control the amount of fish caught.

This could be developed in a way that ensures communities up and down the coast get a fair opportunity to make a living from the sea.

Congress should insist on this provision when it revises the Magnuson-Stevens Fisheries Conservation and Management Act this year.

While delaying "the catch" is politically unattractive, watching cod populations decline further is unconscionable.

Rebuilding cod and other groundfish is a smart investment.

Only then can fishermen once again bank on the mighty cod.

— Special to the Telegram

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