

Moratorium means more than “Northern Cod”

Written by Gabe Gregory, op-ed
Friday, 17 August 2012 18:35

Twenty years have past since the groundfish moratoria were declared. Most people think of one species and one groundfish stock when the word moratorium is mentioned. The word moratorium has become synonymous with the Northern Cod stock only. This is most unfortunate because while northern cod was our largest and most important groundfish stock, it represented only about 25% of groundfish landed. The magnitude of the groundfish collapse impacted much beyond Northern Cod.

The groundfish moratoria devastated the rural economy of our Province. The most productive towns and communities in the industry were lost due to the groundfish collapse. These include Port aux Choix, Port aux Basques, Ramea, Burgeo, Hr. Breton, Gaultois, Fortune, Grand Bank, Burin, Marystown, Trepassey, Hr. Grace, Port Union and St. Anthony. In addition, many other communities lost the most important component of their economy. While the inshore groundfish industry was primarily based on cod, it seasonally provided substantially more employment for longer periods and contributed to the economy of many more communities than is currently derived from shellfish.

TAGS: groundfish,moratorium, northern cod, shellfish, rebuilding strategy, NL fishery

The groundfish collapse has had a profound effect on the south and west coast communities of NL. In fact, NL's most productive cod stock was the stock known as Northern Gulf cod. For many years the Gulf cod stock yielded in excess of 100,000 tonnes mainly by inshore-based fleets. In addition, tens of thousands of tonnes of Gulf redfish and flatfish were harvested. Now you come to realize how important groundfish stocks were to the communities along NL's west coast. Similarly, the south coast communities were supplied by vast groundfish landings from Grand Banks and St. Pierre Bank stocks of flounder, cod, redfish, yellowtail, greysole and haddock. These stocks combined yielded much greater harvests and employment than those

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derived from Northern cod.

Why is it that as NLer's we have forgotten what we have lost and what the groundfish collapse/moratoria really and truly mean? Why is it that after twenty years we have no recovery of groundfish? The reasons vary but chief among them is our failure to implement conservation-based fish management of our fish resources. Rather than follow sound scientific advice and the principles of the precautionary approach to manage fish resources, we continue to establish annual catch limits based on short-term socio-political motivations while at the same time largely ignoring science. The fact is that groundfish species have life spans ranging between a decade and two (flatfishes and cod) while others range up to five decades and longer (redfish).

Unfortunately, the past two decades have not been devoted to rebuilding groundfish stocks. We have instead chosen to continue to exploit groundfish stocks at much lower levels. These lower harvest levels however, reflect relatively high exploitation on these stocks, particularly given their depressed spawning stock biomass levels, poor recruitment, etc. The decisions to exploit groundfish resources are driven by our need to sustain a very marginal economic attachment to the fishery to gain access to income support through the EI system. Indeed, our once productive communities have all been replaced by an unsustainable over-reliance on depressed and over-exploited fishery resources and the EI system.

The marginal attachment to the fishery is probably best exemplified by reviewing fishing effort and participation. It is alarming to compare the participation rates in the fishery today as compared to just a couple of decades ago. During the recent MOU process it was revealed that the average larger fishing enterprise (> 40 feet) operates less than 40 days per year while the smaller vessels (Consequently, dependence on income support (fishers EI program) has increased over the past two decades. By comparison, in the 1980's, fishing enterprises operated several months each year (May-October) and accessed EI during the months of November through April.

Even though shellfish, particularly snow crab, is more abundant, it too is being over-exploited. Over large areas, this resource is experiencing severe decline as over-exploitation is taking its toll. As shellfish declines there will likely be even greater pressures politically and socially to increase exploitation on depressed groundfish resources. There is currently no means within the fishery management systems to adjust to this resource reality.

So how do we really start to rebuild our fish resources and our rural economy? First we must

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use sound fishery management principles such as the precautionary approach to determine exploitation of fish resources based on the best available science. That means reducing our annual harvests and by-catches of most species. Second, we must protect and conserve any recruitment to groundfish stocks and enable successive year-classes to contribute to stock growth. That means restraining and curtailing fishing effort in favour of stock growth which must remain a steadfast goal for a period of at least the generational life span of the species (about two decades for cod). Third, we must impose the same rigorous management approach to the straddling stocks on the Grand Banks as we place upon ourselves. That means implementing conservation- based management within Canada and NAFO. We cannot expect of others what we are unwilling to do ourselves. Fourth, we must implement sound economic principles to the management of the fishery. That means managing the fishery as we would any other natural resource. Strategies such as that outlined have been introduced round the world with much success.

A rebuilding strategy will create short-term challenges; however, the pay-off will be tremendous for generations to come. The options are limited as our fishery resources are continuing to decline and we will eventually have more widespread hardship in the rural areas than has been endured for the past two decades. While there are reasons to be optimistic about our future, opportunities can only be realized by managing differently. We should not expect any different outcomes by continuing on the path we have been on for the past two decades.

Groundfish stock rebuilding is possible. We need to change our priorities and place conservation, adherence to scientific advice, and best practices in fisheries management at the forefront.

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