

## Capelin and Ecosystem Issues in NL/Inadequate Research Capability

Written by Gus Etchegary

Friday, 13 August 2010 16:52 - Last Updated Friday, 20 August 2010 17:16

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Without a well-managed capelin fishery there can never be a successful rebuilding of the groundfishery which is the only hope for the survival of coastal fishing communities in N&L. We have gone 18 years since the moratorium without the Government of Canada, through DFO, taking any measures whatever to rebuild that once huge fishery we delivered to Ottawa in 1949 and which they mismanaged to almost extinction in the intervening years. In fact as evidenced in the following assessment, successive DFO Ministers and their senior bureaucrats have methodically reduced our fishery science capability to almost total ineffectiveness. What is even more disturbing is the documented fact that practically every other fish species under DFO management is in the same state as the capelin species.

While its very encouraging to note that the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador has recently announced a fishery science program led by the experienced scientist Dr. George Rose, the recently announced "Ecosystem Research Initiative" by DFO cannot be accomplished unless the DFO's scientific capability is restored to its pre-moratorium level. The magnitude of the task to assess the variety of fish species requires a major science program and the professional personnel and support staff to effectively complete the work.

The following is an assessment of the state of our all important capelin stock and its management by DFO. It is so disturbing that all participants in the N&L fishery should be aware of the seriousness of the present situation and the negative impact it can have on any hope of groundfish recovery. In case politicians, bureaucrats and supporters of the present Federal Government fisheries policies disagree with the following statements and comments there are internet websites shown to which they can refer for confirmation of its accuracy.

According to the [DFO website](#) the catches of capelin around Newfoundland have totaled nearly 20,000 t so far in 2010, making it currently the largest fishery in Newfoundland. The last full scientific assessment of Newfoundland capelin was in 2001. Since then Newfoundland Science Pelagic Section has lost two out of the three PhD research scientists in the group through retirement. Neither was replaced. Instead their positions were cut as a cost-saving measure.

Also, since 2001, essential long-term survey series needed for capelin stock assessments have been cut. A 2008 DFO Science [update](#) on the status of the stock reported that there were "no recent estimates of abundance available for the entire stock, however a spring acoustic survey covering an index area had estimated abundances that are considerably lower than those derived in the late 1980's. Because of the uncertainty of the level of exploitation on this stock and the importance of capelin as a key forage species, caution is advised." A further DFO [update](#)

in 2009 noted that "due to the elimination of the fall capelin acoustic survey in Div. 2J3K, the

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aerial survey of

spawning schools, the offshore fall juvenile survey, and the reduction in the number of spawning beach surveys from seven to one....a quantitative assessment of capelin abundance in Subarea 2 and Div. 3KL is no longer possible.”

Is capelin important in the ecosystem? A [report](#) published in 2009 on the DFO website titled “Probing key connections in the Newfoundland and Labrador marine ecosystem” emphasizes the importance of capelin as a key species: “These fatty, energy-dense fish are key prey for cod and other groundfish and a critical connector between primary and secondary production (zooplankton and phytoplankton) and the upper levels of the marine food web, including large fish, marine mammals and seabirds...knowledge of capelin is critical to understanding how the ecosystem is going to develop.”

Currently there is only one scientist in the Newfoundland region working on these important ecosystem linkages – Dr Koen-Allonso under the “Ecosystem Research Initiative”, recently touted in the media by DFO Science Director Barry McCallum as a major new research initiative of which he is “particularly proud”. One person can’t make much headway given an ecosystem as large and as complex as the one off Newfoundland – it needs a team of researchers under the Ecosystem Research Initiative to make progress. With no scientific assessment of the capelin stock and minimal ecosystem research on the impact of capelin on cod stocks and other groundfish species, DFO fisheries management has very little to work with. What is the scientific basis for the current 41, 691 ton management quota? Is it precautionary? Is it sustainable? Is it low enough to allow recovery of the capelin stock and the groundfish stocks that depend on it for food?

Gus Etchegary

Chairman

Fisheries Community Alliance

TAGS: capelin, NL, ecosystem research, stock assessment, inadequate science capability, science cuts

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