Changing Communication and Roles: Innovations in Oregon's Fishing Families, Communities, and Management

Fisheries throughout the United States are undergoing dramatic change. Oregon Sea Grant's Adapting to Change project documented how fishing families, communities, and the commercial fishing industry are adjusting to these changes. Using interviews, focus groups, surveys, and educational outreach programs with members of the trawl and troll fleets, we examined how changes in communication and roles among fishing families, communities, and fisheries management may combine to produce desirable innovations at these three levels. With women's increasing involvement in fisheries management and the emergence of industry-wide support networks, decisions are being made in different ways among fishing families and communities, as well as at the management level. Our research found that changing the lines of communication alone, however, does not guarantee that innovation will occur. The article concludes with highlights of positive changes brought on by flexible roles and increased communication, while noting issues still plaguing family, community, and management contexts.

Introduction

Commercial fisheries in the United States are undergoing considerable change. After expanding rapidly with the development of new technologies in the late 1970s and early 1980s, in 2002 the industry is experiencing resource scarcity and decline. At the same time, difficulties in communication within and among fishing families, the fishing industry, and fisheries management contribute to community members' stress and insecurity about the future. Using interviews, focus groups, surveys, and educational outreach programs targeted at members of Pacific Northwest trawl and troll fisheries, we describe how communication at the family, community, and management levels has influenced fishery practice. Increased communication does not always translate into improved decisions and meaningful input from the diverse participants in the fishing industry. However, innovation can spring from effective communication among individuals in different roles.

Context

In the Pacific Northwest, the culture of fishing stretches back 150 years for Europeans, and thousands of years for Native Americans. In addition to providing income, fishing provides considerable psychological rewards by allowing fishers to work independently, to tackle interesting challenges, and to spend time on the open ocean (Hanna and Smith 1993; H. Mederer, University of Rhode Island, pers. comm.).

Because fisheries in the United States vary tremendously, this article's focus is on Oregon, the state where we conducted our research. Oregon's fisheries face many of the concerns felt in other regions. Trolling and trawling are the two most common gear types used in the state. To earn enough to support a family, trollers usually target multiple fisheries or supplement their income with non-fishing jobs. Trawling, however, is a full-time job and until recently, could provide a comfortable family income.

Both the commercial salmon and groundfish industries in Oregon are experiencing crises meritling disaster relief efforts. From 1975-79 (before the declines of the 1980s), Oregon salmon fishing averaged $35 million per year, ex-vessel (1999$). At the peak of the fishery, 2,500 families earned income from salmon fishing. From 1995-99, income dropped to $2.9 million per year, with only 800 families earning income from salmon fishing (Radtke and Davis 2000; C. Smith, Oregon State University, pers. comm.). After a period of full utilization and overcapitalization, the Pacific groundfish fishery is also in decline. In Oregon alone, commercial groundfish landings contributed $33.9 million ex-vessel (1999$) in personal income to the economy in 1995, but this decreased to $22.9 million in 1999 (Radtke and Davis 2000).

Expectations generated in the 1970s and fluctuations in other natural resource industries have made recent fisheries declines particularly devastating. Because fishing as an occupation is inseparable from other areas of a fisher's life, changes in the industry ripple through fishing families and com-
munities (Danowski 1980; Gilden and Smith 1996a, b). In addition to fishing, many Oregon coastal communities have economic and cultural roots in the timber and tourism industries. Declines in the fishing and timber industries have necessitated the relocation of many families.

**Fishing Families**

Most fishing businesses in Oregon are small and family based. The strong family ties observed among commercial fishing families in previous studies across the United States have been shown to help families manage daily strains and major stresses (Poggie and Gersuny 1973; Smith and Jepson 1993; Shafer 1996). There are some female fishers in Oregon, but because the majority of fishing boat owners, crew, and operators are male, most literature and the current projects focus on this typical gender division. Exploring the status of women fishers is outside the scope of this paper, but those interested in the subject may refer to Fields’ (1997) book, *The Entangling Net,* which describes the lives of Alaska fishing women. It should also be noted here, as Greenlaw (1999) observed, that many within the fishing community (including fishermen’s wives and women who fish) prefer the term “fishermen” over “fishers,” considering the latter to be misplaced political correctness. In the quotes that follow, no fishing family member used “fishers” as they spoke of their situations.

Fishermen associate mainly with other men, both at sea and in port. They support each other in repairing boats, finding crewmembers, and pursuing other industry-related activities. The isolated nature of their work at sea contributes to a sense of belonging to an exclusive community, which at times can lead to an “us against them” mentality (Davis 1986; Jentoft 1999). Depending on the type of fishery they pursue, fishermen may work alone for long periods, making independent decisions under difficult conditions. On both trawlers and trollers, fishermen work within a hierarchical structure that clearly delineates the roles of captain and crew. When applied to situations within the family, these independent and hierarchical styles can lead to conflict (Thomas et al. 1995).

The responsibility of maintaining the shore-side business and home falls largely on the spouse’s shoulders (Thiessen et al. 1992; H. Mederer, University of Rhode Island, pers. comm.). The wife or shore-side partner works independently, managing business and family finances, running errands for the boat, and working with fish processors and sellers. She also manages the household, keeps the family together, and provides emotional support (Davis 1986; Smith 1995; Bogan 1998).

Women’s roles and the importance of their skills and labor to sustaining fishing enterprises have been well documented (Davis 1986; Smith 1995; Davis and Bailey 1996). Dixon et al. (1984) described fishermen’s wives’ crucial organizational, economic, and emotional support, and Davis (1986) found that women played an important role in defining what it meant to be a member of the fishing family/business community. Thiessen et al. (1992) found that in the roles of home-based business partner, wife, and parent, women provided the social and economic support that allowed men to go fishing. When fishermen are at sea, their wives are often active participants in community activities such as town councils, chambers of commerce, schools, and scouting clubs. This participation often stops temporarily when the fisherman returns (Danowski 1980; Shafer 1996; Bogan 1998).

**Fishing Communities**

We use the term “community” to refer to a community of interest, rather than a specific geographical place. Therefore, the fishing community includes anyone engaged in the fishing industry and industry support, as well as members of fishing families. In Oregon, where the vast majority of fishing businesses are family businesses, the term “fishing community” comprises a large number of family businesses engaged in all types of fisheries. Similarly, our use of the term “management community” denotes all aspects of fisheries management, from scientists to administrators. This community level of analysis allows us a unique perspective for observing communication within and among fishing families, fishery groups, and the fisheries management community.

Shafer and Anundsen define community as “a dynamic whole that emerges when a group of people participate in common practices, depend on one another, make decisions together, [and] identify themselves as part of something larger than the sum of their individual relationships.” Furthermore, community members are committed to “their own, one another’s and the group’s well-being” (1993:10). From this definition, it can be argued that families involved in fishing are deeply involved in the fishing community, with strong work, friendship, and occupational community relationships (Davis 1986). Fishing families have strong connections to both their occupational and geographic communities (Poggie and Gersuny 1973; Smith and Jepson 1993; Shafer 1996).

**Fisheries Management**

Important communication challenges exist between the fishing community and the fisheries management community. When the regional fisheries management council process was created, it was designed to include a variety of interests, including commercial fishers, in the decision making process. However, one of the problems most often cited by Oregon fishing community members is the industry’s superficial involvement in this process (Dwyer 1997; Gilden and Conway 2001). Smith and Jepson (1993) reported similar findings.
in Florida, where fishermen felt their knowledge was not considered useful by fisheries managers. Although in Oregon and elsewhere the decision making process mandates public participation, this participation has traditionally taken the form of oral or written testimony at management meetings. Currently, the Pacific Fishery Management Council (PFMC), which is responsible for making fisheries management decisions for California, Oregon, Washington, and Idaho, is making more of an effort to include fishing industry members in the process through e-mail testimony, advisory panels, and other means. However, fishers still feel they are not sufficiently represented (Gilden and Conway 2001).

The formal nature of communication with fisheries management contributes to the divide. Fear of public speaking and other anxieties prevent all but the most motivated people from addressing management meetings, and affect the quality of information presented (Dwyer 1997; Walker and Daniels 1999). In addition, when fishers do speak at management meetings, they perceive a lack of respect by biologists and policy makers (Dwyer 1997). Mrakovcich (1993) studied fishermen who participated in the management process. She found that managers' views were significantly different from trollers' views, whether or not the trollers had participated in fishery management. Trollers who participated had similar views to those who did not. Mrakovcich postulates that one of the purposes of a decision-making process is to improve interactions and foster the exchange of ideas between participants. The current process evidently failed to do so, even though there was communication between participating trollers and management community members (K. Mrakovcich, Oregon State University, pers. comm.).

Women's involvement in the management process is another aspect of participation. Only a few studies have explored women's involvement in management. Davis (1986) found that women in the Newfoundland fishing industry played an active role in organizing and participating in lobbying groups, and Hall-Arber (1996) found Sicilian-American women similarly active in Gloucester, an important fishing community in the northeastern United States. Rarely have women's fishing associations played a role in management (McCay and Jentoft 1996). This is beginning to change, as we will explore below.

This article seeks to integrate current understanding of fishing families, communities, and management so we can better comprehend the issues facing each level. As previous literature indicates, communication within and between each level is key to understanding the problems plaguing the fishing community. Our research focused on uncovering examples of innovation within fishing families, in the fishing community, and in fisheries management.

Research Background

Many researchers have explored the social and economic importance of fishing (Smith 1981; Hanna and Smith 1993; Martin 1994). Our research, conducted through the project described below, builds upon their earlier work. This multi-level project included investigators trained in several disciplines who contributed expertise regarding families, communities, and analysis of management at a depth that any single investigator or research project would be unlikely to achieve.

From 1995–1997, Oregon Sea Grant funded a cooperative research and outreach program called Adapting to Change: Fishing Businesses, Families, Communities, and Regions (ATC). This multidisciplinary project included input from anthropologists, sociologists, economists, fisheries scientists, and human development and family scientists. It comprised seven projects, including the three described below:

- Conway (2000) conducted an educational outreach project that used three family members ("peer connectors") to extend educational and network support to others in the fishing community and to provide information to help people cope with change. The peer connectors worked in 13 small, rural communities from the southwest Washington coast to the northern California coast. Participants in the outreach project learned new skills in tracking expenses, managing family and business finances, coping with loss, communicating effectively, managing periods of transition, and working together. The peer connectors created or strengthened social networks by delivering skill-building opportunities related to communication, leadership, and group process.
- Zvonkovic (2000) studied interactions between fishermen and their wives in commercial fishing families. Her data comes from three focus groups comprised of Oregon fishermen's wives, interviews with 14 families and 28 spouses, and a survey of 74 fishing family members.
- Gilden and Smith (1996a, b; Smith and Gilden 2000) combined a survey of 357 Oregon troll permit owners and 666 Oregon and Washington gillnet permit owners with interviews and documentary research to explore their responses to federal salmon disaster relief programs.

As this project unfolded and the authors shared their data, an intriguing pattern emerged. We discovered that despite challenges, increases in communication and flexibility in roles sometimes sparked innovation. Successes and challenges in these areas are described in this article. Unless otherwise noted, the quotes included below are from Oregon fishing family members interviewed by Zvonkovic or Conway.
Results from the Adapting to Change Project

Changes and Challenges in Communication

The unique nature of the fishing industry creates communication challenges in many areas: within the family, within the fishing community, and between the fishing and management communities.

Fishing family communication

Over 62% of fishermen on the West Coast fish from ports away from their home bases (unpublished data). This mobility requires that fishing family members maintain strong communication networks. Zvonkovic and Conway both found that fishing family members were well aware of the communication challenges posed by commercial fishing. The issues raised in interviews and focus groups included making decisions alone and together, disconnecting and reconnecting with family members, long-distance parenting, timing sensitive discussions, and the benefits and drawbacks of new telecommunications technology. Both fishermen and their wives acknowledged the need for communication in maintaining family cohesiveness. As women said about fishing marriages,

It’s a lot of work....You really have to decide if you’re gonna be committed and work at it, or decide it’s not worth it....

Things other wives take for granted—seeing their husbands across the table at dinner or sleeping next to him in bed every night—are special events for a fisherman’s wife.

In focus groups, women said they did not want to raise problems when talking with their spouses at sea over two-way radios or cell phones. Two-way radios particularly are troublesome because all communications can be heard by anyone else tuning in to the same frequency. One fisherman’s wife noted that cell phones were a great advance in fishing family communications, because they allow private conversations. Even in private conversations, however, it is difficult for couples to discuss problems or sensitive subjects when one member is at sea:

I tell him all the good news....I never tell him the bad news. I’m not so sure that’s such a good thing....He needs to know that things aren’t just peachy keen.

Since we got the cell phone, he can keep up better with things happening for the kids and on shore. However, I find myself still censoring out some things until he gets home.

When interviewed, fishermen spoke of feeling isolated from their families while at sea. However, they also admitted contributing to this isolation by not calling home until halfway through a trip, when they begin to anticipate their return and want to familiarize themselves with what is happening on land. As fishermen said,

I have to keep my mind on the business of catching fish and staying alive. I can’t afford to daydream about my kids at the “wrong time” or I might not get home...ever.

When I’m on the beach, I’m happy to talk about how my kid is getting bad grades or the money we don’t have to pay the bills. I don’t want to hear about it until I get home, because I can’t be there to do anything about what’s going on. It affects my sleep and my concentration...and that’s no good for any of us.

Both husbands and wives recognized a rhythm to husbands’ contact with their families when husbands were at sea. As a woman in one focus group said,

When they’ve been out there for a long time, that’s when you notice your phone bill. You know, the calls are longer and they call more often.

Another wife put it,

The longer he’s gone, things are more stressful...I mean, my nerves are fraying, his nerves are fraying, the kids are stressed out.

Certain conversation topics are taboo among fishing families. In focus groups and interviews, fishing family members said they avoid discussing danger or acknowledging that they miss absent partners. Many wives emphatically deny that they miss their husbands when they are at sea.

With the weather being so up and down lately, by the time he actually went fishing, I felt a sense of relief.

Both men and women deny worrying about the danger inherent in fishing. They know that it exists and respect it, but they rarely talk about it in front of each other.

I know it’s exhausting physically and mentally out there. The danger, the stress, the frustration, and the physical discomfort that comes with fishing for a living....I understand them all. I need to keep it in mind when he gets home, not talk about it with him.

We’re reluctant to talk about it. Maybe we think it’ll be some kind of jinx....
Communication within the fishing community

In addition to exploring communications within fishing families, ATC's outreach project fostered communication between different groups in the fishing community. Interactive forums held in Oregon fishing towns during 1994-1996 served as venues for identifying communication shortcomings, cultural differences, fears, and goals. Educational publications designed and reviewed by members of the fishing industry provided candid assessments and practical strategies for coping with change.

Communication within the fishing community itself is a major challenge. The monolithic "fishing industry" is actually comprised of many different and often conflicting interest groups based on gear types, fisheries, geographic locations, and other factors. Most communication in the fishing community takes place within, and not across, these interest groups. These interest groups form gradually as members establish relationships, build trust, and share common interests. While they may have differences of opinion, individuals tend to share more interests and trust within these interest groups than they do with other groups. Communication between different interest groups, such as trawlers and trollers, occurs less frequently, and often takes place in highly stressful environments such as meetings or other venues where harvest quotas or other contentious topics are being discussed. Nevertheless, Gilden, Smith, and Conway all found that fishers and family members generally trusted their fishing colleagues as better sources of information than newspapers, agencies, environmental groups, or other sources. Important communication takes place at informal encounters on the docks, in coffee shops, and while repairing nets or maintaining gear.

In addition to this person-to-person communication, community-of-interest networks such as commodity groups and fishermen's wives organizations are an important resource for the industry. While commodity groups encourage networking, they also foster an environment of competition by separating people based on gear types or fisheries. For example, trawlers communicate with other trawlers through the Oregon Trawl Commission and its publications, halibut fishers have their own newsletters and associations, and crabbers communicate through the Oregon Crab Commission and its efforts. Few groups communicate with all members of the fishing community. However, cross-industry groups such as fishermen's wives organizations are beginning to reach out to members of different commodity and gear groups. This is significant because it requires participants in the community to step out of their roles and make an effort to understand broader issues. Such flexibility is a key component of innovation and of successful participation in management.

Communication between the fishing and management communities

Due in part to the lack of cohesion within the fishing community itself, communication between the fishing and management communities is troubled. As noted above, fishers complain that management does not listen to them. At the same time, fisheries management personnel claim that fishers do not respond to their attempts to communicate.

An example of problematic communication surfaced in 1994, when the Pacific Fisheries Management Council closed the ocean fishery for coho (Oncorhynchus kisutch). In response, the governors of Oregon, Washington, and California declared a "salmon disaster" to allow fishers to receive federal disaster relief assistance. In turn, the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) held a series of meetings in coastal communities to generate input on the design of the disaster relief programs. In all, the meetings drew 700 people and provided 37 hours of testimony (Federal Register 1994).

Smith and Gilden (2000) interviewed salmon trollers about their reactions to the disaster relief programs. Their findings were supplemented by a similar survey of gillnetters, and echoed many of Conway's (2000) findings from the ATC outreach project. Some fishers felt the meetings were merely a "dog and pony show," and that NMFS staff did not respect attendees' views. Members of commodity groups and other industry organizations felt they understood the needs of participants and could have allocated disaster relief more fairly than the federal agencies that managed the programs. Although fishers convinced disaster relief planners that their income in the few years before the coho closure was not representative of the income they typically received, they felt the resulting eligibility rules for unemployment and other assistance programs were excessively complicated. Fishers also complained of inappropriate distribution of funds.

Fishers wanted public acknowledgment that the causes of salmon decline were not purely related to fishing, but included dams, logging, and farming practices, and urban and coastal development. Several fishers expressed a desire for managers to respect their local knowledge:

Fishermen don't mind that regulators don't understand much about fish—the problems are complex. It is an outrage when they act as if they do. I've never had anyone from [the] State or Fed ask me about salmon habits. The old salts who have made a good living for many years have lots of untapped knowledge. (Gilden and Smith 1996a)

Lack of communication between agencies and fishers hampered the dissemination of disaster relief funds. As is standard procedure for federal agencies,
the disaster relief programs were announced in the Federal Register, and subsequently in agency newsletters and newspapers. However, 71% of respondents to Gilden and Smith's 1996 troll survey heard about the disaster relief programs through word-of-mouth, and one-quarter were unaware of their existence. After word-of-mouth, most trollers got their information from fishing industry newsletters and publications, state agency newsletters, and local newspapers.

Our research through the ATC project highlighted women's and men's different perceptions of the disaster relief programs. Since male staff from NMFS spoke to male fishers about the disaster relief programs, suggestions focused on how to restore salmon stocks so fishers could keep fishing. In contrast, fishermen's wives at this time were focused on stabilizing their families and communities. In workshops conducted through the outreach program, fishermen's wives expressed a desire for classes on improving family communication skills. They sought health insurance, retraining, alternative income opportunities, ways to live with less, and family and business counseling.

He was worried about money...well, we both were, but I was also worried about how to keep our family strong.

Communication Isn't Enough: Challenges in Families, Communities, and Management Related to Changing Roles

Despite some improvements, communication within and among management, and within fishing families and communities has not consistently improved decision making and/or satisfaction with decision-makers. Another complicating factor is the roles people play. The roles people play in the fishing industry—including fisherman's wife, troller, trawler, pot fisher, crabber, longliner, lobbyist, supporter—constantly shift as the industry changes. Trollers become crabbers; Columbia River gillnetters move to Alaska; fishermen's wives become vocal supporters of the industry. Some roles are entrenched in tradition, while others have always been loosely defined. As roles become flexible, our research discovered telling examples of improvement in communication and in decisions, as well as examples of continuing challenges.

Changes and challenges in family roles

Spouses in fishing families face awkward problems of appreciating and understanding each other's family and business roles and of dealing with changes in communication when husbands return from sea. In interviews and focus groups, both husbands and wives were sensitive to these changing dynamics. As one husband said,

Sometimes I think the wife even resents the husband because she gets things going the way she likes it done at home and then when the man comes home, he expects to step right into the throne and it just doesn't work that way.

Comments from two women reveal differing viewpoints on the same situation. One wife discussed the chasm that can appear between marital partners when a husband first returns from the sea, and the challenges that arise as he becomes involved in daily family life.

Your husband's gone five months and he comes home and all of a sudden you've got this stranger in your house that wants to take over everything. You've been in control and the kids resent it....I have kids who resent it when their dad comes home....very much so....because the rules are different.

Another wife said,

It's hard to run a house six months at a time...If you've got a system, it needs to be in place all of the time. Yet [husbands] feel like they're not part of the family. They want to get into the family, and I can understand that side too.

As part of the outreach project, Shafer (1996) wrote a series of “Letters to Fishing Families” that describe paradoxes of gender roles in the commercial fishing community and innovative ways that wives and families have created to cope with them. Balancing roles within the family and using effective communication to cope with separations and reunions are some of most important challenges for fishing families.

Changes and challenges in roles for the fishing community

Our research through ATC highlighted several issues related to changes in roles played by those in the fishing community. First, as noted above, divisions within the fishing industry limit members' ability to present themselves as a united entity to the fisheries management community. The very independence and self-reliance that attracts people to fishing makes it a challenge to band together as a group. In addition, many fishers are simply not financially able, comfortable, or interested in attending fisheries management meetings or

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As one woman said, providing education on topics important to the industry, ports in response to industry change. Currently, fisherwives groups have formed or been re-created in major fisheries and gear types. Members are trying to influence the industry through communication rather than by taking an individualistic “each business for itself” or “each fishery for itself” approach. Many fishermen’s wives groups have formed or been re-created in major ports in response to industry change. Currently, fishermen’s wives organizations on the West Coast exist in various ports from Alaska to California. Many groups provide education on topics important to the industry, such as seafood education, working waterfronts, health insurance, safety, understanding the fisheries management process, or communicating with elected officials. As one woman said,

Our local fisherman’s wives group...has become an incredible resource for this community. I’ve noticed that fishermen who before...thought of the fisherman’s wives group as just a ladies’ tea, “get together and bake cookies for people” thing, they have a lot more respect...Even my husband...has a lot of respect and uses the information, really uses them as a resource.

Another said,

The fishermen’s wives group in our port, over the years, turned into a group of mostly older women. I was intimidated to get involved. Now more, younger wives have gotten involved and together, young and old, we are doing some really good things.

Another woman linked her involvement in fishermen’s wives groups with a growing awareness of the industry:

If you get more involved in your fishing community, then you can be more aware of the limits that they put on fishing, and what a fisherman actually has to do....

As fishermen’s wives groups begin to play a more active role, they must also deal with gear and fisheries conflicts. For example, the Pacific Coast Fishermen’s Wives Coalition (PCFWC) formed in the 1970s to promote seafood (G. Goblirsch, Oregon Sea Grant Extension, pers. comm.). When they delved into political issues that set one fishery against another, however, the group faltered. Towards the end, most of the active members were involved in the salmon fishery, and others perceived the group as only serving those associated with the salmon fishery. Support for the coalition waned.

Generally, fishermen’s wives groups focus on particular geographic communities, and they sometimes fail to connect with other groups along the coast. In April 1996, however, with assistance from the ATC outreach project, former members of the PCFWC joined with new members to re-invent the group as a region-wide, multi-gear, multi-fisheries network called the Women’s Coalition for Pacific Fisheries (WCPF). WCPF’s goal is to connect fishing families and communities in a positive way, regardless of gear type, fishery, or geography. With members from Alaska to southern California, WCPF is now promoting and educating people about the benefits of playing cooperative, collaborative roles in the fishing community and between the fishing community and the management community.

Changing roles and fisheries management

Since its inception, fisheries management has also experienced changes in management objectives, roles and representation, and communication. For example, the Pacific Fishery Management Council’s initial objectives were to gain control over the troll fishery. Since the council’s establishment in 1976, it has proposed increasingly restricted
seasons and areas open to trollers, and most trollers’ participation in the management process is limited to trying to slow these restrictions.

Relations between the fishing and management communities are problematic in part because participation in the formal process has been limited to only a few industry leaders. Although the Pacific Fisheries Management Council focused on salmon management for many years, no trollers or gillnetters were appointed to the council. As of January 2001, the council is comprised of 16 voting members, including two commercial fishers (a longliner and a trawler), two charter fishers, and one processor. The council’s salmon and groundfish advisory subpanels are more representative of commercial fishers. The salmon advisory subpanel is comprised of 16 people, of whom 4 are commercial fishers, 3 represent charter interests, and 1 is a processor. The groundfish advisory subpanel includes 18 people—8 commercial fishers, 3 charter operators, and 3 processors.

Management has focused representing commodity groups (such as salmon, groundfish, and crab) which alone are not reflective of the new realities of the fishing community. Many fishermen we spoke with felt they were not fully represented on the council. The council members who do represent them are very busy and are often overwhelmed with the amount of information they need to absorb. In addition, council meetings are usually held in inland cities that offer airports and large meeting facilities. Fishing family members who live in remote coastal communities often say these meetings are difficult to attend because of the distance involved and the necessity of losing fishing time.

Changes in representation and roles can also be studied in relation to communication. The culture of providing testimony in a formal meeting, according to fixed rules, diverges sharply with the culture of fishing communities, where in-person, informal exchanges are preferred. Members of fishing communities often feel that important decisions are made before council meetings, and that their testimony will have little influence on subsequent decisions. In addition, many are uncomfortable speaking in public and are unaccustomed to taking on the role of advocate. In this light, the activities of fishermen’s wives group are extremely important. These groups provide a comfortable venue for women to develop skills in group process, communication, and citizen involvement, while building ties with other fishing community members.

Because fishing has traditionally been seen as a male occupation, the fisheries management community has made little effort to reach out to those who hold roles other than fisherman, such as women or fishing families. Although women do work at the federal level of fisheries management, they are very poorly represented in the Pacific Fisheries Management Council. Currently, of the 19 voting and nonvoting council members, the 16 salmon advisory subpanel members, and the 18 groundfish advisory subpanel members, only 2 are women.

Rather than formally participating in management by serving as a council member or testifying at meetings, many women are working with managers individually or as part of a collective to promote the importance of women and families to the industry and to promote the fishing community itself. Since most of these women do not fish themselves, they feel that the fisheries management community does not recognize them as having legitimate voices or expertise. However, they do see themselves playing a leadership role in reaching across gear and fishery interest groups. In time, involvement in these groups may lead to more women being involved in the council process through formal representation or just through consistent attendance at council meetings.

Innovation Among Fishing Families, in the Fishing Community, and in Management

Innovation is occurring at all three levels—among fishing families, in the fishing community, and in the fisheries management community—at varying rates. However, it is important to note that many families and fishing businesses have adapted to change by leaving the industry and moving on to other occupations or locations. For them, innovation means finding new ways of life that do not include fishing.

In the fishing community, innovation appears in many forms, and fishing families often demonstrate human creative potential in the face of challenges. On the most basic level, fishers must be able to adapt to changing weather, ocean conditions, fisheries, markets, and regulations. Thinking creatively about where to catch fish, using novel means to communicate with distant family members, creating organizations that heal divisions in the industry, and developing new ways to manage fisheries are just some areas where innovations are being tried.

In Zvonkovic’s interviews and focus groups, and in Conway’s outreach programs, fishing families reported having to create communication opportunities in situations that other families take for granted. For example, families use audiotapes, videotapes, journals, photo stories, and scrapbooks to help fishing fathers catch up on missed birthdays or other events in their children’s lives. Fishing fathers also use cell phones and videotapes to communicate with their families about life at sea when time and weather allows.

Multi-region, multi-gear groups such as the fishermen’s wives organizations described above and other “friends of fisher-
men” groups are also examples of innovation among the fishing community and between it and other communities. As the membership of these groups broadens to include others interested in common issues (municipal water quality and quantity, health insurance, resource conservation, coping with large scale weather changes, etc.), these groups provide innovative and effective approaches for mutual learning and solution building. WCPF and the Pacific Marine Conservation Council (a coalition of fishers of different gear types, fishing family members, scientists, and environmentalists) are two examples.

The Internet provides new communication opportunities for those with access to the web. Families use the Internet to send e-mail and a few have even used it to play synchronized video games when one player is on land and the other is at sea. The Internet allows easy access to the web sites of fishermen’s wives organizations, commodity groups, and management agencies, and it allows equal involvement regardless of gender, educational background, or location. Fishing community members with consistent access to the Internet can read and comment on the latest regulation and management decisions. However, many fishers do not have Internet access on their boats, and some do not have access at home. Others do not have the time or desire to use the Internet. Conway’s survey (unpublished data) of Oregon fishing families found that 65% of respondents had Internet access—some on boats, but most on shore. Therefore, when fisheries managers turn to the Internet to communicate with fishing community members, they must acknowledge that some fishermen do not rely on the Internet as a primary source of information, at least while at sea. However, if they target their information to the on-shore partners, they may achieve their communication goals.

Using web sites can be another innovative way to educate, inform and connect these communities and their respective members. The Heads Up! web site (www.heads-up.net), which grew out of the ATC outreach project, is one example of innovation in web communication. Heads Up! is a collaborative web site created by Oregon Sea Grant and WCPF. The site provides a bulletin board where news about the fishing industry, management, fishing families, safety, and seafood can be quickly and easily accessed and shared. The site’s goal is to connect individuals, families, and communities interested in the West Coast commercial fishing community. This type of cross-community communication tool can help decrease isolation, increase involvement, and develop a more balanced exchange of ideas within the fishing community and between the fishing and management communities.

There, as always, is room for further innovation. Open communication and planning among the fishing community regarding whom, when, and how best to participate with the management community in decision making is a critical, needed change. This change may necessitate changing roles within the fishing family and community (between gender, gear, location, etc.).

Further innovation can occur between the fisheries management community and the fishing community. Involvement of management personnel on multi-region, multi-gear, multi-interest groups could be one possible step toward improved or direct communication and relationship building. Fear and past history may initially impede true innovation; some risks to both communities may have to be endured to make the needed changes.

Conclusion

The topics of communication, changes and challenges in roles, and innovation are ubiquitous among fishing families, businesses, and the fishing community itself. Communication problems, which are a challenge on many different levels, are exacerbated by inequitable and shifting roles. However, the innovation that is a hallmark of the commercial fishing community has led to new ways to address these challenges. The innovation shown by fishing family and business members in adapting to change demonstrates the resilience that their community requires.

Although independence and autonomy are integral parts of the culture of commercial fishing, the industry will only acquire equal respect and value from the fisheries management community when it can present a unified front—a front that includes women and respects their substantial contributions to the community. To create this sense of unity, the fishing community must recognize that the roles held by its members are often in transition and must be adaptable enough to change in tandem with the shifting roles in the management community. The fishing community must also identify itself as larger than the sum of its individual fishers, families, businesses, gear types, and fisheries. Our research findings support Jentoft’s (1999) conclusion that community members will benefit from institutions that foster cooperation and strengthen social bonds. ATC’s outreach project contributed to this effort by working with community members to develop communication and group process skills, leading to the development of the Women’s Coalition for Pacific Fisheries.

By focusing on issues that span gear types and fisheries—such as safety, health insurance, promotion of all fisheries, and communication—women are transcending the traditional divisions within the fishing community. As women move into the public sphere, community-of-interest networks are evolving into an active force. As this movement continues, it will become an important counterpoint to the stress caused by current fisheries crises.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank the many members of the fishing family/business community who shared their history, knowledge, and perspectives on the industry and their families. We also thank Courtland Smith, Sally Gallagher, Gail Wells, and Karina Mrakovcich for providing critical comments of earlier drafts of this article. This work was supported by Oregon Sea Grant through NOAA, Office of Sea Grant and Extramural Programs, U.S. Department of Commerce under grant #NA36RG0451.
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October 2002 | www.fisheries.org | Fisheries