



FACT SHEET: COMMUNITIES

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WHAT IS A FISHING COMMUNITY?

Although from a distance the “fishing community” may seem like a single group of like-minded people, it actually consists of many communities based on gear type, fishery, geography, and values. Social scientists spend a lot of time trying to define “community” so that communities can be studied and compared. The Magnuson-Stevens Act (MSA) defines a fishing community as “a community which is substantially dependent on or substantially engaged in the harvest or processing of fishery resources to meet social and economic needs, and includes fishing vessel owners, operators, and crew and United States fish processors that are based in such community.”

In interpreting this definition, the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) has stated that “A fishing community is a social or economic group whose members reside in a specific location...” This “official” interpretation means that a fishing community exists in a specific place like Astoria, San Pedro, or Seattle. However, other types of communities exist. For example, an “occupational community” is a group of people involved in the same occupation, like the coastwide community of trawlers who engage in similar activities. A “community of interest” is made up of people who share similar interests—for example, people who are concerned about making the fishing industry safer. One town or city might include many different occupational communities and communities of interest.

However you define fishing communities, it can be said that they are composed of diverse, independent people who do not fit easily into neat categories and who rarely, if ever, present themselves as a homogeneous group.

COMMUNITIES AND DATA COLLECTION

Compared to data about fish stocks, not much information on fishing communities is systematically gathered. Most funding for fisheries management goes towards assessing fish stocks, and the complexity of the

fishing industry make it hard to pin down. Census data does not differentiate between fishery and forestry, and concerns about confidentiality limit the publication of economic data. To complicate matters, many fishing communities are unincorporated or are parts of larger communities that do not rely on fishing (for example, Los Angeles). Also, many fishing community members only fish part-time, or hold other jobs while they fish. In a way, collecting community information is about as hard as collecting information on fish stocks—both populations are highly mobile and exist in a complex and constantly-changing universe.

Most community research on the West Coast takes place at the NMFS Northwest Fisheries Science Center, Alaska Fisheries Science Center, at Sea Grant programs, or at universities like Oregon State University and the University of Washington.

The NMFS Northwest Fisheries Science Center’s Economic and Social Science Research Program examines the impact of West Coast fishing on communities and regional economies, including how management decisions affect communities (<http://tinyurl.com/yco84jyb>). Their current areas of focus include commercial fishing, recreational fishing, and community economics. Data is collected from participants in the commercial groundfish and salmon fisheries, and from state-regulated crab and shrimp fisheries. The data, such as the economic performance of harvesters and processors, helps NOAA scientists determine the effectiveness and outcomes of management actions such as the trawl catch share program.

For recreational fisheries, surveys are administered to anglers, shellfish harvesters, and charter boat operators. Recreational fisheries data provides a basis for quantifying the effects of changes in management or ecological conditions.

Community research focuses on community dependence on marine resources as well as the economic and social impacts of fishery management on coastal communities.

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WHAT DOES MANAGEMENT SAY ABOUT FISHING COMMUNITIES?

The 1996 revision of the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act, which is the basis for fisheries management in the United States, recognized the importance of human communities and their relationship to fisheries. Among other things, its National Standard 8 declares that fishery conservation must take into account the importance of fishery resources to fishing communities, with the goals of providing for the “sustained participation” of those communities in fisheries and minimizing “adverse economic impacts” as much as possible. This focus on communities represented a shift taking place in many areas of natural resource management. However, funding for studying the effects of management on communities remains at a low level.

The National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) process also calls for an assessment of the impacts of actions on communities. As part of the NEPA process, both economic factors (economic base, employment, revenue, income, etc.) and social factors (population dynamics, social institutions, environmental justice, cultural values, community identity, history, etc.) need to be addressed in environmental assessments and environmental impact statements. However, NEPA states that “economic or social effects are not intended by themselves to require preparation of an environmental impact statement.”

In addition to these Federal mandates, a growing number of natural resource managers recognize the importance of including the views and values of diverse “stakeholders”—

including fishing community members—in the management process. In fact, the regional fishery management council process was set up specifically to include stakeholders in the process. People who effectively represent the concerns of their communities can help create more effective and efficient fisheries management.

OTHER RESOURCES

The Council’s five-year review of the groundfish trawl catch share program looks at the effects of the program on communities along the West Coast (<http://tinyurl.com/ybg7eq6v>).

The Council’s Research and Data Needs document outlines the Council’s needs in these areas. It is updated on a biennial basis.

The Fisheries Economics Data Program (EFIN) conducts annual industry cost and effort surveys. It has also collected several datasets of interest to fisheries economists, including labor and wage statistics, fuel prices, and measures of changing prices and living conditions. EFIN is housed at the Pacific States Marine Fisheries Commission (PSMFC).

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