Stuck at the back of the boat

After helping resolve a five-year inshore fishery dispute, women fishers are again shut out of decisions on managing the east coast fishery

By **Sara Roach-Lewis** (sarariacg-lewis@pei.sympatico.ca), Project Manager, Women's Network, Prince Edward Island, Canada

On the east coast of Canada, in the province of Prince Edward Island (PEI), an inshore fishery of about 1,300 small boats struggles to find the balance between sustainability and making a living. In the past 30 years, mostly out of necessity, women have found themselves on the backs of these boats, fishing beside their partners. However, their role in the larger management of the fishery has been limited.

In 2004, several of us formed the Women for Environmental Sustainability (WES) in response to a crisis in the herring industry. A truly grassroots movement led by women in the fishing town of Souris, PEI, WES sought to bring an understanding of the issues to the wider community. One of the many partnerships we developed was with the Institute of Island Studies at the University of Prince Edward Island. Through the Social Economy and Sustainability Research Network, a pan-Canadian partnership of academics and community groups, a mutual interest in understanding the role of women in fisheries management developed into a full-blown research study.

We, the women of WES, noticed firsthand how few women were involved in managing the fishery and felt that female voices were missing from the table. We wanted to understand why, and by creating a partnership with the local university, we received the help we needed. As part of the resulting study that examined the evolving role of women in fisheries in PEI and our continued absence from management decisionmaking, we developed a case study of the WES experience. Our case study now serves as an example of what can happen when women elbow their way to the management table.

Trouble began brewing in the herring fishery in Souris in 2000 when large herring seiners came to fish in PEI's waters for the first time in about 30 years. Up until 2000, the herring seiners fished their entire annual quota, allotted by the Department of Fisheries and Oceans Canada (DFO), in the Bay of Chaleur, Northern New Brunswick. But concern about overfishing local stocks led DFO to limit the seiners' catch in the Bay of Chaleur to 50 per cent of their quota, and this pushed the seiners out in search of new fishing grounds. When they needed to fill half of their quota outside the Bay of Chaleur, seiners followed these migrating herring to the fishing grounds on the northeast shore of PEI.

The large, over 20-m long, corporate-owned seiners began fishing in the shallow waters off PEI that had traditionally been the fishing grounds for the small-boat, inshore, gillnet fishers who depend on herring as bait for the lobster, tuna and rock crab fisheries. The seiners were able to enter these grounds because of a change made to a map showing regulated fishing areas. The change involved removal of a line that had previously limited seiner fishing to waters outside of the 25-fathom depth contour. It was unclear whether this change to the map had been an unintentional error, or a conscious change in regulations implemented without discussion with the affected parties. Whatever the reason for the change, 'moving the line' was actively contested by inshore fishers.

Community members watched with dismay and apprehension as the large seining vessels unloaded their catches on Souris wharf. On average, the five seiners would unload 20 tractor-trailer loads of herring in a single day. Many observers were old enough to recall a time, 35 years ago, when seiners had 'fished out' the herring stocks from the Northumberland Strait on the south side of PEI. It was only after those stocks collapsed that the government banned the seiners from that area.

Fishers observed that many herring spawning areas in the Northumberland Strait had remained barren after the seiners had gone. They believed this was because herring run in distinct schools, each of which tends to return time and again to a particular place to spawn. Once an entire spawning group has been picked up in a net, there are no fish left with the instinct to return to that spot.

In Souris in 2000, fishers knew well that the north side of PEI had dozens of small spawning beds. They believed that the groups of fish attached to these beds were vulnerable to elimination by the highly efficient process of seining. Souris citizens were worried, not because herring brings a great deal of cash into a fishing enterprise—it doesn't—but because these abundant fish are food for so many other valued species.

Between the fall of 2001 and 2003, tensions rose during the fall herring fishery between the

RHONDA LEWIS

Lobster fishing harbour of Naufrage on the north shore of Prince Edward Island, Canada. Herring is used as bait for lobster fishing

...what can happen when women elbow their way to the management table.

local inshore fishers and the herring seiners, culminating in a blockade at the Souris wharf, where 350 fishers blocked the large seiners from unloading their catch. Although the protests were peaceful, reaction by the provincial and federal governments, the courts, and the police was swift and forceful. Armed with an injunction filed by the Barry Group Corporation (which owned some of the seiners), riot police with loaded semi-automatic machine guns and police dogs moved in to disperse the crowd. They arrested 14 fishers.

Despite a sense of camaraderie among fishers, and lots of talk from politicians and fisheries managers, the disputed 'line' had still not been reinstated by the fall of 2004, and fishers felt abandoned by their government. The police prepared for the new herring fishing season by setting up surveillance on the Souris wharf, while the local fishermen's association advised its members not to protest on the wharf due to the threat of lawsuits by the corporations. The situation in the small fishing community was frustrating, confusing, with the real possibility of violence. The community was at a loss. Everyone was talking about it, but we couldn't protest on the water or on the wharf.

I was on maternity leave that fall, and my father, who was very passionate about fishing and about the damage the seiners were doing to the herring stock, kept saying: "Someone should do something! We need to have a rally!" So finally, after hearing this for a few weeks, I decided that since no one else was doing it, perhaps I should. Within a week I had enlisted help from family and friends and had alerted the media, identified speakers, and organized a rally. At the suggestion of the PEI Fishermen's Association, the rally focused on the impact the dispute was having on women, families and the community. Over 800 people from across the island packed into the rink for the rally.

Women talked about how the conflict was affecting their lives financially and emotionally. They talked about how hard it was on their children, including how challenging it was to teach their children to respect police authority when their fathers were being arrested for trying to protect their families' livelihoods. Encouraged by community support, a dozen women met after the rally to discuss what to do next. As a result, a new organization emerged: WES, with a board of directors made up of four women.

For us, the fall of 2004 and winter of 2005 will forever be remembered as the 'year of the herring'. In the week following the rally, we met with the provincial leader of the opposition on PEI and the Prince Edward Island Fishermen's Association (PEIFA). Others, including my mother, Bev Roach, were involved in a small protest on the wharf in Souris in which they stood in front of a police car trying to pass. The local community came together again after my mother was arrested and fingerprinted, by establishing a legal defence fund on her behalf.

The four WES board members split our work according to our respective strengths. One of us liked research, while another was a natural organizer and administrator; the third took care of the finances, and I became the spokesperson. Faced with arguments from DFO and the seiners that the industrial fishery did not threaten herring stocks, we had a lot of research to do. We met with anyone who would talk to us about herring: fishermen, politicians, the media, community leaders, scientists and resource managers. We read management plans and scientific studies, created a website, incorporated our organization, and wrote letters to editors.

Despite some resistance from people within the fisheries towards our involvement, we went to meetings in the community and listened to local concerns, which enabled us to incorporate local issues into our research to provide a fresh, articulate and credible voice for the community. Our community commented on our ability to speak the language of the DFO, and to use science and research to make our points. Local fishermen were strongly supportive. They attended our WES meetings, offered suggestions, provided direction, helped with letter writing and, in about three months, raised Can$25,000 for WES' work—almost all of it donated by fishing families.

Despite our hard work for the community, WES was not invited to play any role in PEIFA. One fishery observer, a male community member who was interviewed during the research, said: "The PEIFA should be embracing

WES (and calling on WES to assist with research and analysis of fisheries issues)." Looking back on our experience at the management table, we were warned not to trust the DFO, that they would use us and pretend to consult with us, the same way they did with the fishermen. We gave DFO the benefit of the doubt and fully participated in many meetings with them. We respected their rules, which meant that at most meetings we did not have a voice at the table and were welcome only as observers. We participated only when invited to do so. But in the end, our role and participation in the management of the herring fishery was neither respected nor documented. When we were no longer useful, we were no longer invited. People in power, including the PEIFA, did not embrace the fact that women fishers had a voice that could and should be heard.

DFO consistently framed the herring debate as one about science, and they claimed to own all the knowledge that was relevant. The fisheries managers would say, "But we have SCIENCE"; and you could almost see it in really big letters, looking very important. They said the inshore fishers had no scientific evidence to support their theory that the seiners were depleting the genetic diversity of the stocks, or the discrete stocks themselves. Depending upon the scientist and the day, they sometimes refused to even accept that there are distinct populations of herring.

In an attempt to understand the science, we spent countless Saturday and Sunday afternoons meeting as a group to study past stock status reports, acoustic surveys, and other research documents. It quickly became apparent that there was more to the science story than DFO was willing to admit, so we organized the Winter Herring Conference on 12 March 2005. We invited fishers, concerned citizens, academics and DFO scientists to spend the day talking about the science of herring. By the end of the day, it was obvious to everyone that DFO's science was grossly underfunded compared to other countries such as Norway, and that their science was far from cutting-edge.

We also learned what a major role politics plays in the management of the fishery. We were told repeatedly that the only way the herring dispute was going to be resolved was through a political judgement. In Canada, under the Fisheries Act, the Fisheries Minister has discretion to set fishing quotas and boundaries, and it was widely accepted that the Minister was not on the side of the small-boat, inshore fishery. So in addition to studying the science, we read transcripts from the Standing Committee on Fisheries and Oceans, trying to assess the political angle. In the end, we believe a resolution resulted from the following formula: intense public pressure + negative media attention + minority government = political action.

On 13 May 2005, our local Member of Parliament, Lawrence MacAulay, announced in Souris that the 25-fathom line was reinstated, effectively pushing the seiners out of the shallow waters off PEI's north shore. This decision was viewed as a great victory for everyone who had worked so hard—for the fishers, for WES, for the provincial government, for the PEIFA and for the citizens of PEI who had supported the fishers and their communities.

We wish to state that although WES was part of the solution, resolving the herring dispute was ultimately a collaborative effort. The provincial government mounted a lawsuit against the federal government, which drew a lot of media attention to the herring issue. The PEIFA, under new leadership, came out strongly against the seiners and DFO's position. Bev Roach's court case provided a focal point for public sympathy. Letters to the editor and media attention provided additional political pressure, and, as a result, MPs from PEI worked the corridors of power in Ottawa, promoting the issue in the context of a minority Liberal government—one that needed votes from eastern Canada. Those in power made a decision based not on what was best for the environment, the industry, or the herring, but on ensuring they would stay in power. It is not a great way to manage a fishery, but that's the way it works.

"intense public pressure + negative media attention + minority government = political action."