

Women lead the way

The fishing community of Gloucester, Massachusetts may well improve its fortunes, thanks to its politically charged women

In 1969, a group of determined women established an association in Gloucester, Massachusetts, the US. Called the Gloucester Fishermen's Wives Association (GFWA), its purpose was to protect and promote the Gloucester and New England fishing industry as well as work to improve the quality of life for fishing families.

In Gloucester, fishing vessels and businesses are family-owned. One of the original objectives of GFWA was to establish a co-operative. As word of these plans got around in the community, local fish processors began to threaten the fishermen. If they were to form any co-operative with the wives, the processors warned, the fishermen would not be able to do business with them. Hence, many participants abandoned the effort out of fear. As a result, the co-operative was never formed.

GFWA also championed the concept of a 200-mile Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) to allow the nation to protect and manage local fisheries for the benefit of coastal communities. This was necessary because in the late 1960s and early 1970s, foreign factory trawlers were 'vacuum cleaning' the fishing grounds off New England and depleting fish stocks which local communities depended on for their future.

Members went to Washington to testify in Congress to support the enactment of legislation for the EEZ. Since then, all nations have adopted the 200-mile limit.

Nevertheless, at the US national policy level, the push for economic efficiency in seafood harvesting is making it more and more difficult for small-scale fishers to survive economically. This thrust is disguised behind a mask of conservation

rhetoric. Consequently, the general public is quite confused by fisheries debates.

GFWA represents small-scale fishing families who lack the financial and organizational resources to influence economic and regulatory policy which favours more efficient harvesting. Most of the conservation rules which are imposed to save fish stocks cause plenty of economic damage to fishing families, while doing little to reduce fish mortality.

The policy is usually summed up in a few words: 'There are too many fishermen chasing too few fish.' Many observers note that the regulations enforce a reduction in fishing capacity by driving families into financial ruin.

The public normally accepts this policy and fishermen have been depicted as greedy rapists of the sea who care about nothing other than instant short-term profits. This image is promoted everywhere—from children's feature films to national news broadcasts. Children of fishermen in Gloucester come home from school asking why their daddies are doing bad things to the fish.

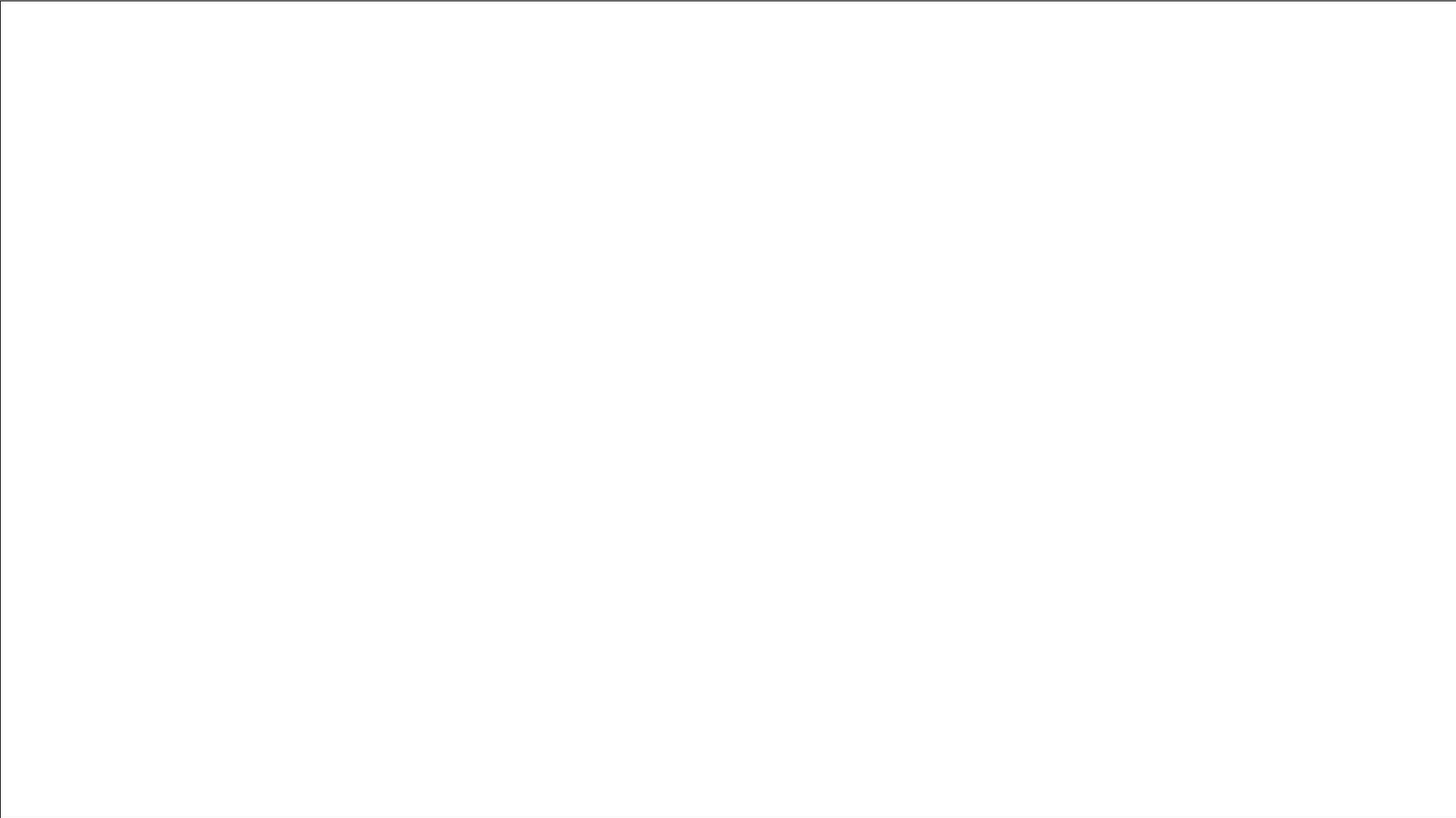
Government rule-making, which is often manipulated by outside economic interests, promotes conflicts among fishermen who use different fishing methods, by favouring one group over another. This makes it very difficult for the fishermen to unite their efforts to defend their own interests.

Organizational capacity

The GFWA has begun to work towards helping the fishermen resolve these conflicts among themselves. To do this, we are building up the organizational capacity to bring family-owned fish businesses together.



United States



Our goal is to work together with as many as possible, in order to clarify the issues for public debate, to leverage economic benefits for our businesses, to influence government policy-making and to illuminate the many hidden costs to the public of consolidating seafood harvesting too narrowly.

To begin building up our organization, the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Boston and Bernard Cardinal Law, Archbishop of Boston, have helped us with money and co-operation.

The Archdiocesan health care system, Caritas Christi, is committed to working with us to develop an affordable health insurance program for fishing people.

This economic benefit will be provided to members of our affiliated fishing associations. By offering affordable health care through affiliated fishing associations, we hope to a build up membership in local grass-roots organizations as well as encourage them to collaborate at a regional level.

This is only the beginning. Another of our goals is to connect with organizations like the International Collective in Support of Fishworkers.

Each September, we hold an International Conference of Women in Fisheries. Until now, most of those who attend have been from the US and Canada, since we share the same fisheries, despite human-made political barriers.

These conferences have been very useful from a' number of viewpoints. Women from Canada, in particular, have warned of the serious negative consequences of simply providing welfare to fishermen so they can stay home from fishing. The social and family consequences of this Canadian policy have been disastrous.

Until recently, the fishermen in Gloucester too have refused to follow the leadership of their wives, even though the women have become much more politically effective in ways the men never had time to develop. The fishermen did not even want to admit or try to understand all the achievements the Wives Association accomplished on their behalf.

Many of the fishermen still blame the wives for causing their problems by participating in the political debate. Many fishermen have little or no understanding of the issues, or what their problems would be, had the wives not been fighting for them for the 26 years since GFWA was established.

New relationships

Now, a segment of the fishermen are looking to the organization to help them. This new relationship, expressed by membership in GFWA, is opening new possibilities to alter history. The experiences, talents and skills of the fishermen, their wives and other stakeholders from the community, are being blended in a common action plan. It is exciting and, at the same time, very hard work. Hopefully, we are not too late to save the fishing cultures in our coastal communities of Massachusetts and New England.

This piece is written by David Bergeron, who works with the Gloucester Fishermen's Wives Association