

Dragging women through suffering

The technology of dragging has ravaged the fishery of Newfoundland and caused grief most to the local women.

Dragger technology was first introduced in Eastern Canada in the late 1890s. At the time, it was poorly received by fishers who believed the technology would eventually destroy fish stocks. The Royal Commission of 1928 described otter trawls with mouths a hundred feet across, catching 130,000-250,000 lb of fish.

The Commission had then predicted that draggers would destroy the spawn of cod and haddock destroy the feed grounds take large quantities of immature and unmarketable fish and glut the market, making it impossible for inshore fishers to dispose of their catches.

The fact that our forefathers predicted the eventual outcome of dragger technology 70 years ago makes today's crisis even more of a tragedy.

Fishers vigorously protested the use of this gear because of its potentially negative impact on the inshore fishery.

Nevertheless, after the Second World War, the augmentation of the shore-based, fixed gear fishery with an industrial, mobile fleet became a reality.

Dragger technology was designed to enable the pursuit of a mobile offshore fishery. One of the advantages assumed for this type of gear was the possibility for greater exploitation of fish stocks on a year-round basis.

The technology provided better access to relatively unexploited stocks, thereby ensuring greater profits for its corporate owners.

Side trawlers were common until the late 1950s, when stern trawlers came to be widely accepted as being far superior. In

side trawls, the gear is worked from the side of the boat; in stern trawlers, from the stern. The shift from side trawlers to modern-day draggers saw an incredible increase in the catch and carrying capacity of the boats. The side class trawlers of the 1950s had a gross tonnage of 300-500 GT, whereas the newer draggers have a 2,500-4,000 GT capacity.

Modern draggers are large boats, usually 120-160 ft long, with a capacity of up to about 300,000 lb of fish. They generally employ around 16 men who go on 8-25 day trips at sea.

During the peak years in the mid-1980s, boats of Fishery Products International (FPI) would sometimes show up with 400,000 lb of fish on board. This was before certain boxing and icing regulations decreased the carrying capacity of the big draggers.

Draggers are primarily owned by corporations such as FPI and National Sea, although there are smaller draggers in the 65ft range owned by smaller companies.

The fishing technique employed is called otter trawling or dragging, and involves huge nets attached to the boat by cables.

Large metal squares, called otter boards, weighing up to five tonnes each, keep the mouth of the net open.

Channelling fish

The otter boards drag along the bottom, smoothening the way for the gear while also channelling the fish into the mouth of the net. Once a school of fish is trapped between the huge otter boards, escape is unlikely. This type of gear is unselective, both in relation to the size of fish caught and the mix of species. It is also disruptive to the seabed.

From the perspective of the owners, this gear is considered to be more economically viable because it allows exploitation of large volumes of fish in a relatively short period of time with a greater percentage of profit.

One example of this approach is the winter dragger fishery of the northern cod, in which draggers fish the four main spawning grounds of this stock. When the fish notice spawning, they mass together by the thousands. This presents an ideal opportunity to catch most fish at low cost and effort.

The dragger fishery employs a broad range of modern fish-finding aids such as sonar, cableless net sounders, LORAN and automatic course recorders.

The dragger captains have access to scientific information about water temperatures, breeding ranges and other

fish habits. This contributes to a highly intensive fishery. That is why modern dragger techniques have been dubbed 'instrument fishing'.

It is interesting to consider the rapacious nature of dragger technology. In terms of who designs, builds and operates the boats, it is an exclusively male technology. It is designed by men, for their own ownership and use. In Newfoundland, the workplace is 100 per cent male.

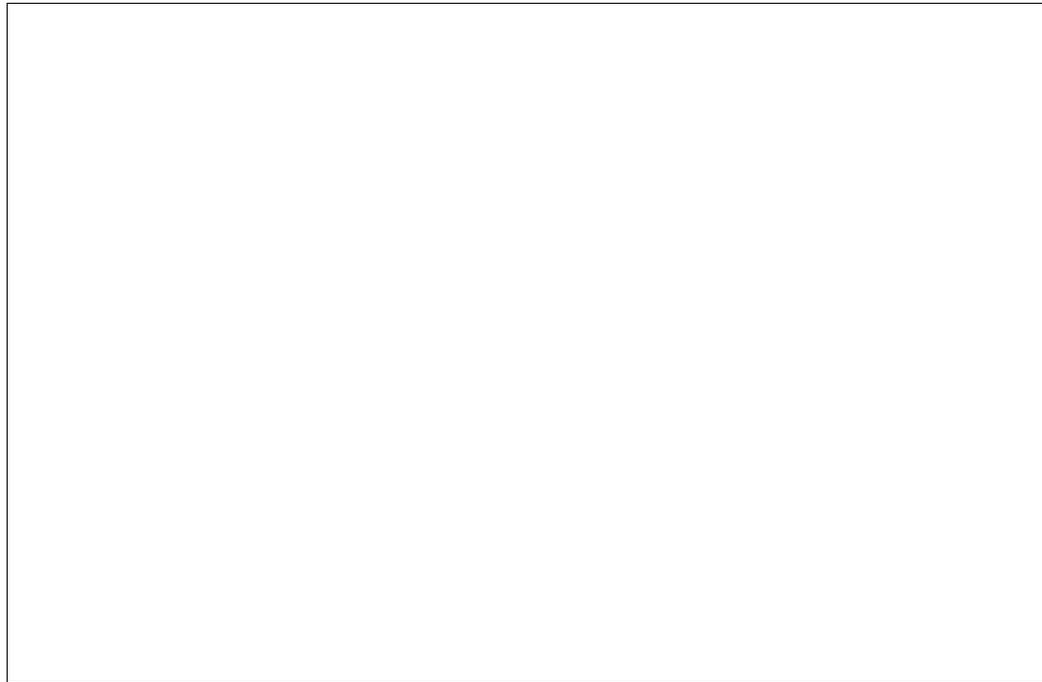
Dragger fishing approaches a natural resource with very little sensitivity or selectivity. Its main objective is to take what it wants as quickly and brutally as possible.

There is a parallel between this masculine orientation and the approach that many men within our patriarchal society take towards women, children and natural resources.

Table

Two fishing technologies: dragger vs. hand-line

	Dragger	Inshore hand-line
BOAT:	Atlantic Vigour Corporately owned 150-ft steel hull Cost: Can \$2 million	Inshore hand-liner Privately owned 22-ft fibre glass hull Cost Can 22-20,000
CREW:	32 men Non-unionized Hired through Nova Services who take percentage of pay	1-2 people, male and/or female Unionized
SALES:	Primarily to own corporate interest	To worker-owned cooperative fish plant
FISHES:	Clams	Cod
GEAR:	Mobile 'track and catch' Offshore and year-around	Inshore fixed (hook-and-line) Seasonally, depending on migratory patterns of fish
CATCH:	May lose all income on occasion due to quality of clams Average catch 250,000-330,000 lbs clams in shell for 20-25 days fishing	Known in th emorning if there is a market for the days' catch and how much can be sold Average catch: 1,800-2,500 lb cod per day trip
FUEL:	Average consumption 375,000 liters per round trip of 20-25 days 1.36 litres fuel to catch 1 lb clam in shell	20 litres of gas per day trip 1 litre of fuel to catch 124 lb of cod



Not surprisingly, in a lengthy discussion of stern trawling, 14 men were reported to have had a frank discussion about the technology, yet not once did they mention the issues of conservation, over exploitation or social impact of the new gear.

Today's dragger fishery no longer involves uncertainty or chance: if the fish are there, they will be found.

As one observer says, we now have the technological capacity to track down the last fish in the ocean.

Dragger technology's effect is felt not just by the target species but by the by-catch species and the benthic habitat as well.

The table on the facing page provides some comparative information about a typical modern dragger and Newfoundland's traditional hook and line technology.

The problem of dragging has been discussed by Jim Beckett, a member of the Canadian Atlantic Fisheries Science Advisory Committee.

He points out that bottom dragging can damage the young of the target species.

It also decreases the survival rate of eggs by dislodging and destroying them. Once

detached, the eggs become food for a broader range of predators.

Beckett argues that closure of vital areas to all fishing, or at least restructuring gear type to hook-and-line or floating gill nets, combined with closed seasons, could ease the problem of exploitation, particularly on spawning grounds.

To give an insight into the destructive potential of this gear type, Dr. Leslie Harris describes a mid-water trawl whose opening would allow 16 jumbo jets in a four by four formation to fly through it.

As of today, thanks to draggers, 17 of 20 Newfoundland ground fish species have a lower biomass than is normal, with a dozen of them having the lowest biomass ever recorded.

It is questionable whether or not the northern cod stocks will actually be able to ever recover.

Unwanted by-catch

The only problem that corporations, government officials and scientists will openly admit exists with dragger technology is that of unwanted by-catches and immature fish.

By-catch refers to anything living that gets caught and destroyed in the process of dragging for a target species.

Since draggers scoop up thousands of pounds of fish at a time, all of them under phenomenal pressure as they are dragged aboard, nothing survives.

Two common techniques used by dragger management officials in order to offset the few government regulations that exist are high-grading at sea and using smaller mesh liners in the cod end.

The process of high-grading refers to the illegal discard of valueless immature fish that are supposed to count against a boat's quota.

While 100 percent observer coverage of draggers was recognised by inshore fishers as one method of curtailing such corrupt practices, it was not until 1991 that this was actually achieved, just months before the moratorium was called.

It is apparent that the potential of draggers to decimate whole ecosystems is virtually unlimited.

This is obvious considering the catching capacity of a trawl, the highly sophisticated fish-finding technologies and the corporate greed that fuels the process.

There is an apparent unwillingness on the part of fishery scientists to err on the side

of caution. This seems paradoxical since science preaches the importance of conservation and balance within ecosystems.

Another striking peculiarity of the approach of science to the fishery is that stock assessment in recent years has been based on the catches of the dragger fleet plus two annual DFO surveys.

Rather than judge the health of the stock by natural migratory patterns, it has been judged by the volume of the dragger catch.

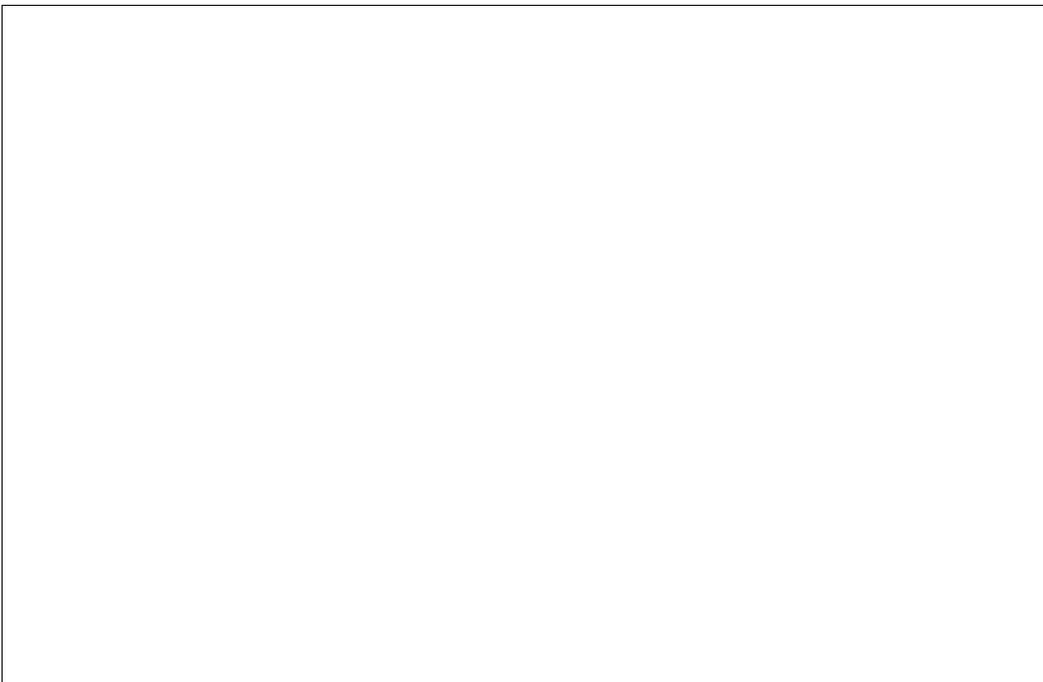
Since tracking and catching technologies are so sophisticated, there is no accurate picture of what is truly available, in terms of normal abundance.

The harvesting effort of modern technology, combined with bad science and gross mismanagement, has had a negative impact particularly on women fishworkers of rural Newfoundland.

With the loss of the northern cod fishery, they have lost access to economic activities. Regulatory policies and the moratorium have also hit them badly.

Impact on women

In order to appreciate the impact that the introduction of dragger technology has had on women, it is necessary to take a look at the current status of women who



are either direct wage earners or indirect wage contributors in fishing households.

One could even argue that women's homes and communities have been forced on to the bargaining table by exclusively male unions, government and corporate policy makers.

The re-introduction of dragger technology in the 1950s, which coincided with Newfoundland's modernisation phase, saw women alienated from their traditional involvement with the industry.

Women have a major investment in the fishery; their jobs, households and ultimately, their communities are dependent on the health of the fishery.

Fish plants are almost always the largest employers in rural fishing communities, especially of women, and the steady decline in fish landings has meant a decline in fish plant work.

To give one perspective of what the traditional involvement of women was, consider a census taken between 1891 and 1921 on Fogo Island. It shows that the number of women engaged in the fishery at that time ranged from 40.5 percent to 43.4 percent of the total work-force.

It is also notable that, in the 1950s, trapmen of Seldom, Fogo Island, sent out their fish to be cured on a piece-work basis to other outports due to a shortage of female labour in Seldom.

The realisation that women workers were being displaced by overfishing was recorded in a 1991 government survey which discovered that 2,850 plant workers would not be eligible for unemployment insurance due to a shortage of fish landed.

In six of the eight districts where 20 percent or more workers would not be

eligible, over half of these people were women.

The political issues at stake get high-lighted when one realises that government officials were aware of impending disaster, yet chose to turn a blind eye to many of the key issues.

Many plant workers who have a lengthy historical attachment to processing northern cod are currently not eligible for compensation due to the restrictive nature of the guidelines, which do not reflect the fact that cod landings have been in decline over the past.

Women are the most poorly compensated since they receive fewer hours of work at lesser rates of pay. The average NCARF benefit for female plant workers is Can \$254 per week compared to Can \$299 for male plant workers.

This decline has resulted in fewer weeks of work for thousands of people each summer. The federal government, in drawing up qualifying guidelines for the Northern Cod Adjustment and Recovery Program (NCARP), ignored one crucial fact.

This was that plant workers were finding it increasingly difficult to obtain unemployment insurance.

While fishers have always had the ability to manipulate the unemployment insurance system either by general averaging of their earnings or by transferring catches into the accounts of other fishers, plant workers have never had this advantage.

Loss of earnings

They have lost innumerable weeks of earnings because they can not hold back hours of work until they have enough in for a stamp.

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Single-parent women can wind up needing welfare benefits to top up their

NCARP wages. One woman with five children and no spouse support gets NCARP benefits worth Can \$900 per month.

There is no recognition at all of women's 'ground crew' contribution and the undeniable amount of work they do within fishing households. Wages for housework and reproductive activities remain well outside the realm of reality as far as policy-makers are concerned.

Although there are now laws that recognise women's domestic labour through financial recompense in divorce settlements, the recognition seems to end there.

It is assumed that if the needs of the male head of the household are met, then surely all needs have been addressed. Household issues are not addressed, nor are some of the broader issues of community survival.

The current provincial government's commitment to downsizing the industry by half or more will leave communities economically devastated.

Many single-industry towns depend on the fishery as the sole source of employment. The closure of plants will mean huge losses to these communities and their residents.

While fish landed may be trucked around the province on a daily basis, a work-force is not nearly as mobile. Traditionally, men are more able to travel for work, have more transferable skills and are not burdened with the responsibilities of care-giving and home maintenance.

Women, on the other hand, look after children, extended families and the home. Many women are single parents, relying heavily on family and friends to help with child-care.

After the economic backbone is removed from many small communities through plant closures, economic pressures may well force mass compliance with what could easily be labelled forced resettlement. It can be argued that women have the most to lose from this process.

This article is written by Vicky Silk of the Canadian Oceans Caucus.