

Here come catch shares: How NOAA and the Environmental Defense Fund plan to destroy North Carolina's working watermen

**By
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When my late father was 24 years old, he returned to Hatteras from Long Island, New York. He returned because the Great Depression had left him jobless and standing in a bread line. He came back home and he moved back in with his parents. He returned so that he could have a place to sleep and a meal that he had provided for himself, a meal that he earned by commercial fishing with his father on the family-owned boat.

While fishing the family boat commercially for the meager income provided by fish prices during the depression, he did what young people in America have always done --- he dreamed of his future and he hatched a plan. The plan he hatched was crazy. The elders in the village told him so. They said it would not work. They shook their heads at his ideas.

And he did what the young in America have always done -- he put his crazy plan in motion. He started an offshore charter fishing fleet. He launched the first of three Albatross boats in 1937 with charter fishing as his top priority and with commercial fishing as Plan B.

And just how did that crazy charter fishing concept work out?

Well, in a study sanctioned by North Carolina Sea Grant and carried out by economists and a sociologist from the University of North Carolina-Wilmington and North Carolina State University, the charter fishing business is now a \$650 million dollar a year industry for North Carolina with two thirds of that revenue coming from visitors from out of state. Not so crazy after all.

And how much does the state of North Carolina spend promoting its charter fishing industry? The answer is zero (\$0.00) dollars. That lack of government support has never been an issue or concern for North Carolina's fishermen. Why? Because the same independent -- some would say hard-headed -- drive and determination that fueled my father's belief in his dream continues to fuel the dreams and ambitions of the men and women who make a living by fishing both charter and commercially today.

Since the founding of this state, it has been accepted as fact that if you work hard, if you persevere, if you are determined, and if you are lucky, you can be a fisherman. You can own your boat. You can be your own boss. You can feed your family and the larger community. And you can put smiles on the faces and adventurous memories in the minds of countless charter customers who you help experience the wonder and mysteries of our waters.

The only apparent problem with this scenario of being independent, of being a self reliant contributor to society, of providing a service for others is that you do not necessarily get rich. The fishermen do not seem to find this to be a problem, but an alleged environmental group called the Environmental Defense Fund (EDF) does.

That's right, even though its employees do not live here or fish for a living, this group has decided that North Carolina's fishing communities need to be fixed. Or, in their words, they need to be "more vibrant."

EDF has published an endless stream of slick brochures and publications, held numerous conferences, and attempted to enlist numerous fishermen in an attempt to explain how society -- make that the government -- can implement a plan that will "create vibrant fishing communities".

The plan is called catch shares. If you eat fish or like to catch fish, catch shares will affect you.

Catch shares are here. They are, as you read this, being implemented by NOAA through the National Marine Fisheries Service. The goal is to reduce the number of working watermen in the United States by more than 60 percent. The propaganda "informs" fishermen that the ones left standing, after their neighbors are economically destroyed, will be able to get rich and somehow fishing towns and villages will then "be vibrant."

Welcome to catch shares. They are designed to kill off the fishermen. The infrastructure will then die and then somehow, according to the slick brochures produced by EDF and edited by the finest legal minds they can hire, fewer fishing boats and fewer fishermen will result in "vibrant fishing communities."

Just what is a catch share? A catch share is an exclusive guarantee that whoever holds the catch share has the exclusive right to harvest a certain percentage of the total allowable catch of a particular species of marine life. That's a mouthful, and you read it correctly.

It does not grant the right to catch a certain number of fish each year. How many fish can be caught is a number that National Marine Fisheries Service already determines and has imposed on fishermen for years. So if catch shares is not about saving fish, since we already have that scientific process in place, you may be wondering just what the purpose is.

The catch share program is not about how many fish can be caught. Catch shares is only about who gets to catch fish. Catch shares can be bought, they can be sold, and they can be leased or traded.

So the logical question is what is the conservation advantage of catch shares? The answer is that there is no conservation advantage. Catch shares policy is about taking the right to fish away from the masses, from those individuals who want to become fishermen for a lifetime or for a day, and giving that right to harvest fish to a select few. Catch shares is designed to privatize the ocean. As a free American citizen, you might want to think about that one for awhile.

Who will get catch shares? Basically, it will be those with the best past history of landings. That's right -- those who have caught the most in the past will be selected to keep on fishing -- in the name of conservation and, of course, "vibrant fishing communities."

But it gets a lot more interesting and complicated than the simple picture I've presented. You see, the Environmental Defense Fund has been the driving force behind this concept. The group has spent thousands and thousands of dollars promoting this concept. (In the name of full disclosure, I went to Vancouver, B.C., on EDF's dime to learn about it.)

Now what did EDF do in the spring of 2009? Why they sent their second ranking employee -- a \$300,000-a-year lawyer -- to a national conference of investment brokers and venture capitalists to spread the word about an investment opportunity, something called catch shares. That's right. EDF thinks that Wall Street should own catch shares!

So if Wall Street owns catch shares, where do you think North Carolina's small-time fishermen fit in? Seen any evidence lately that Wall Street has any concern about increasing the number of "vibrant fishing communities?" And yet apparently EDF wants Wall Street to own catch shares.

This corporate ownership of exclusive rights is not a wild guess. It is a reality.

The Alaskan king crab fishery is Exhibit A, and in the four years since the imposition of catch shares the crew member shares of the catch have dropped from 50 percent to 30 percent, while the fleet has decreased by two-thirds.

Okay, so most of you are not worried about what happens to the commercial sector of fishing.

Well, last week NOAA publically announced that it wants all professional fishermen to be controlled by catch shares. That's right. Charter boats and headboats are the next to have catch shares. Having previously begun implementation in the commercial sector in Alaska and New England, NOAA and National Marine Fisheries have made public the plan to begin implementation in the recreational sector -- with charter boats and headboats the first targets.

Worldwide various forms of catch shares have been in place for over 25 years. Where implemented, the least amount that the local fishing fleets have been diminished is 30 percent.

I suspect that I am not the only one who thinks that what North Carolina needs right now is an economic boost rather than another economic hit. Further reducing the ability of the charter/headboat industry to produce revenue sounds like economic insanity.

Well, you may be thinking that at least that those who want catch shares are leaving the recreational fishermen who do not fish on charter boats alone. You might want to be aware that a plan has already been suggested that, in the Gulf of Mexico, recreational fishing rights should be sold to the highest bidder. First, we come after the commercials, then we get the charters, and next we go after those recreational types.

The concept of catch shares is straight forward. The exclusive right to harvest fish will be owned by the entity with the most money, period! And those individual owner/operators? Well, they are quaint and they might be good for tourism because of all that local color stuff, but they are just going to have to adjust and get a job with a corporation. After all, coastal fishing communities are just filled with job opportunities.

Catch shares policy is about ownership not conservation! We already have Total Allowable Catch (TAC). TAC already controls how many fish are caught annually. In spite of what you may have read, TAC controls are already in place. For example, North Carolina's bluefin tuna landings in the recreational sector were completely shut down in the late '90s during the height of our season for two years in a row because of TAC concerns. Violators were fined \$25,000, and, needless to say, they were few and far between.

I'll repeat. Catch shares is not a stock management issue. It is an ownership issue.

How soon will catch shares be coming to a marina near you? The answer is that they will be coming very soon unless our elected leaders act immediately. The head of NOAA, Dr. Janet Lubchenco, worked for and closely with the Environmental Defense Fund prior to her appointment to head NOAA by President Obama.

In recent weeks, EDF had a conference in Wyoming (yes, Wyoming) to develop final implementation plans for the recreational sector catch shares. Why an ENGO – environmental non-government organization -- is about the business of developing government policy is, to say the least, interesting.

On Nov. 4, Eric Schwabb, assistant administrator for fisheries, released the formal NOAA announcement that catch shares are coming to the recreational sector.

If we want to see coastal heritage and traditions vanish, we should simply do nothing. If we believe that the right to fish should be the exclusive right of those who have the deepest pockets, we should simply do nothing. If we believe that reducing the ability of coastal citizens to generate income and pay more taxes is good for our state's economy, we should simply do nothing.

On a personal note, I suspect -- perhaps hope is the better word -- that, as the owner of a long standing and reasonably successful charter fishing operation, I will get enough catch shares to continue in business.

However, when I went to Vancouver to learn about catch shares, I heard incessantly about their great monetary value and that raised a question. So, I asked the man who developed the Canadian plan, "How could a young person ever become an owner/operator fisherman with this additional expense?" And he answered after a long pause, "We're still working on that!"

There is something sadly, tragically wrong when a nation's government deliberately creates a mechanism that denies the next generation its right to dream. I want no part of catch shares.

(Ernie Foster is a Hatteras Island native who, after a career in education, returned to Hatteras village and is now captain of the Albatross Fleet. He supports groups that fight to save the heritage of fishing, such as North Carolina Watermen United, and is also a board member of the North Carolina Coastal Federation.)