

Two coasts, two standards

For many communities on the Atlantic and Pacific coasts of Canada, commercial fishing has all but disappeared as an economic activity for the once robust and independent small-boat fleet

There are two contrasting realities in Canada on the matter of support for fishing communities and the small boat fleet that supports these communities: the reality of the Atlantic coast and its contrast on the Pacific coast. On Canada's Atlantic coast the history of corporate control of fishers and their communities by processors has had a long and miserable history.

control that had kept fishers and their communities in poverty for extended periods of time over the previous 200 years in Atlantic Canada.

While the fleet separation and owner-operator policies provided early protections for the Atlantic small-boat or inshore fleets when Canada's Atlantic groundfisheries were put under moratoria in the early 1990s, Atlantic Canada's powerful fishing corporations turned their attention to the stocks and species, like lucrative shellfish, under the control of the inshore fleets. Using a series of legal ruses over the years, they began to effectively breach the owner-operator and fleet-separation policies, and lobby aggressively for their elimination.

Things came to a head in 2011 when a neo-liberal Conservative federal government, responding to corporate lobbying, attempted to get rid of owner operation and fleet separation altogether, and align Atlantic policies with the Pacific region where a series of consolidations and government buy-backs led to the loss of most of the independent fleets, and a growing level of corporate ownership and control over community fisheries. This included foreign ownership by offshore and Canadian companies, often hidden by non-disclosure agreements and dummy companies working as proxies for offshore interests.

Faced with this existential threat, the independent Atlantic inshore fleets rallied together. They created a new national lobbying organization called the Canadian Independent Fish Harvesters Federation and were able to successfully counter the attempts to eliminate the owner-operator and fleet-separation policies. With a subsequent change in government and the support of the son of Romeo LeBlanc, Dominic,

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46

It was for this reason that in the late 1970s, Romeo LeBlanc, the then Canadian minister of fisheries, adopted two major policies in the Atlantic region to complement Canada's extension of its exclusive economic zone (EEZ) to 200 nautical miles and the coming into force of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). These two policies were: fleet separation and owner operation. Fleet separation was a policy to limit corporate fishing licences to vessels over 65 feet (20 metres) in length and prevent vertical integration of processing and fishing for what is known as the 'inshore fishery', that is, vessels of under 65 feet. Furthermore every vessel under 65 feet had to be owned and operated by an active fisher.

On the Pacific coast, LeBlanc felt that these policies were not necessary. There was already a robust independent small-boat fleet on the British Columbia (BC) coast, mainly focusing on salmon, and there was not the same level of corporate monopolization and

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who briefly became Canada's minister of fisheries, these policies were entrenched first into legislation and then into regulations, providing new security for the 10,000 inshore licence holders in the Atlantic inshore fishery.

The opposite happened on the Pacific coast. With no guiding policy to protect the small-boat fleet, the entire commercial fleet was diminished by government policy from a strong component of the provincial economy, employing 16,000 fishers and creating associated processing jobs in the late 1970s, to 5,000 fishers today. Small-boat fishermen on the Pacific coast have watched their incomes diminish year over year as predatory licence leasing costs eat into earnings and fishery access was removed from the commercial fleet to satisfy other interests, including a growing environmental lobby looking to protect marine mammals, a commercial sports fishing industry, and access for First Nations outside the commercial fishing access connected to licensing.

The Canadian government's initial stated policy was that reduction in the fully subscribed commercial licensing regime had to be accompanied by compensatory mechanisms but this policy was often ignored, and court challenges have now stated that the government of Canada has no obligation to compensate commercial fishers because fishing licences are a privilege extended at the discretion of the minister, with no obligation for compensation for licences that are withdrawn or not renewed.

The strong independent Pacific small-boat fleet has now been diminished to a remnant of what it was in 1979. For many communities, commercial fishing has all but disappeared as an economic driver. Attempts to develop Pacific coast policies like owner operation and fleet separation have been resisted by a government bureaucracy for the Pacific region committed to neo-liberal free-market ideology and opposed to any policy that would support small boats over corporate consolidation and vertical integration.

The war to protect the small-boat fleet is now almost over in BC, the

Canadian province that borders the Pacific. The family connection that kept the industry robust for many generations is now nearly completely broken, and almost no one wants to engage or have a career in such a dangerous industry when the Canadian government has made it very clear that the protections that were put in place to safeguard their access to the resource and stabilize their license system are not worth the paper they are written on. Corporate and processor ownership of the remaining

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fishing enterprises continues to happen with no rules in place to stop it, and every attempt by the remaining fleets to petition government to level the playing field by incorporating owner operation and fleet separation for both coasts has been met with resistance by the managing authority, as processor ownership continues unabated.

In 2017 I wrote an article in *SAMUDRA Report* (https://www.icsf.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/4310_art_Sam77_e_arto9.pdf) about the need for the Canadian government to respect the human rights of the small-boat BC fishers. In Atlantic Canada, the owner-operator and fleet-separation policy has helped to stabilize fishers in their coastal communities. This has failed to happen on the Pacific coast and other than some policies of reconciliation with First Nations that have attempted to keep those communities connected to the nearby sea resources, the commercial fleet's connection and support within their coastal communities has now been all but lost forever. 3

For more

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https://www.icsf.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/4310_art_Sam77_e_arto9.pdf

Fisheries Committee on Feb. 5th, 2019

<https://openparliament.ca/committees/fisheries/42-1/130/dan-edwards-1/>

Canada's Oceans Estate: A Description of Canada's Maritime Zones

<https://waves-vagues.dfo-mpo.gc.ca/library-bibliotheque/40622952.pdf>

Small-scale fisheries in North America: research perspectives

https://horizon.documentation.ird.fr/exl-doc/pleins_textes/pleins_textes_6/colloques2/36726.pdf

Fisheries and Oceans Canada in the Pacific Region

<https://www.pac.dfo-mpo.gc.ca/index-eng.html>