

# By, and from, the Sea

Permit banks and collective ownership in Alaska return individual fishing rights to the collective, harking back to the early days of fishing

**M**ore than 12,000 years ago, people on Haida Gwaii, an archipelago off British Columbia about 48 km south of Alaska, were cooking salmon. They are the earliest known humans to do so.

As with all early human societies who lived by the sea and off it, the first relationship with the ocean beyond the northwest coast was one of collective tenure. There were locally-derived systems of norms, rules and practices that evolved over time and gained social legitimacy. Men caught halibut via hook-and-line from canoes; women fileted, deboned and dried the fish. The Haida, Tlingit and Tsimshian peoples of present-day southeast Alaska fashioned large, v-shaped hooks out of wood to snare fish up to 500 pounds (227 kg). *Potlaches*, traditional feasts that involved dancing, fed, impressed and welcomed guests. The rights of Alaska Natives to access, steward and honour relate to, safeguard and/or share (for example) elements of their coastal territories and culture that have fluctuated over time, Tribal members have continued to work hard to keep their cultural traditions alive.

Pre-colonization, halibut was primarily used for food and even rivalled salmon in its dietary importance in some areas. But in the 1880s, after the collapse of Atlantic halibut, the US commercial longline fishery for Pacific halibut took off. Transcontinental railroads brought in new fishermen seeking new opportunity in southeast Alaska. Many of the small towns dotting the scenic islands of the Tongass National Forest started with a saltery, a cannery or a cold storage facility to process and move fish to market. A new tradition of fishing was born.

By 1916, there were signs of over-fishing in the commercial fishery: despite increasing effort, landings

were decreasing. In order to conserve halibut, the US and Canada formed the International Pacific Halibut Commission (IPHC). Since 1923, the IPHC has set science-based catch limits for halibut. In Alaskan waters, however, increased participation drove a race for fish, ever shorter fishing periods and dangerous fishing conditions. To address these challenges, the National Marine Fisheries Service established an Individual Fishing Quota (IFQ) programme for halibut and sablefish in 1995.

The IFQ programme was a departure from the previous collective tenure regimes of traditional, subsistence fishing and early days of local commercial fishing. Instead of access, management, stewardship, exclusion and transferable rights being vested with communities, these rights came to be vested with the individual. Some fishing groups, including the Alaska Longline Fishermen's Association, raised concerns about corporate control of fisheries, and were successful in adding management measures to promote owner-operator requirements. The Alaska IFQ programme is, arguably, the most progressive IFQ system in the country. Twenty-nine years later, it has increased safety and product quality and decreased gear loss and resource waste. The IFQ programme has also significantly increased the cost of entry to fisheries, with quota prices escalating.

## Access rights

Even with controls, any IFQ system commodifies fishing rights. What was once an informal, collective access right now is formal and individual. Rather than access passing down through generations, or by the consensus of a group, access is purchased—a process that works much faster and is much

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A fisherman in Cape Cod, Alaska represents a dire situation of fisheries loss in the US; at stake are traditional marine tenure and Indigenous Peoples, cultures and livelihoods

harder to govern with collective, long-term values. With little access to capital or alternative sources of employment, rural and native communities in southeast Alaska have lost much of their access to the resource. Places such as Klawock, Kake and Angoon have lost 100 per cent of sablefish IFQ, and Klawock and Hydaburg have lost more than 95 per cent of halibut quota. Without access to the quota, the economies of these communities built on fishing are collapsing, threatening both the historic and more recent marine tenure regimes in Alaska.

Alaska represents a dire situation of fisheries loss in the US; at stake are traditional marine tenure and Indigenous Peoples, cultures and livelihoods. Yet, similar community-access issues have emerged in more recent fishing communities across the US as a result of IFQ programmes. Cape Cod, Massachusetts, earned its name in 1602 as a result of its prominent role in the New England cod industry. Yet today, local small-scale fishers struggle

to purchase groundfish permits, let alone live in the wealthy towns dotting the Cape. In February, fishers in Maine reported that the state had likely lost 60 per cent of its working waterfront due to mid-January storms.

#### **Collectivism answers**

How do you counteract the negative impacts of individual, transferable fishing rights? Fishermen around the country have innovated a solution that pays homage to the early days of fishing: through collective power.

In 2008, recognizing the loss of access in their community, the Cape Cod Commercial Fishermen's Alliance created the Cape Cod Fisheries Trust, one of the first community permit banks in the US. With the use of charitable funds, the trust purchases Atlantic scallop IFQ and Northeast groundfish multispecies permits; it then leases them out to members. In 2009, the Alaska Longline Fishermen's Association established the Alaska Sustainable Fisheries Trust with a

similar goal of anchoring access in coastal fishing communities. Lease fees enrich a fish house (like for many lessees in the Gulf of Mexico) or an outsider (for those leasing quota from retired fishermen who moved away), or an individual. But, in the permit bank model, the lease fees enable a community-based fishing organization to fulfil its mission. It can do this, for example, by bringing small-scale fishers to policy meetings, advocating for no-trawl zones, suing an unaccountable recreational sector, or piloting new technology. In other words, lease fees benefit fishers.


Despite these efforts, IFQ programmes continue to favour the wealth of the individual over the health of a fishing community. Consider it from the perspective of a fisherman: you get access to quota (either for free or by purchasing it), you work hard for years, grow your business, survive economic downfalls, natural disasters and shifting markets. Eventually, you are ready to retire. When it's time to sell, you try to guess the market peak. After all your hard work, you deserve the incentive of a good pay-out. But IFQ markets are increasingly volatile due to climate change. Maybe your quota is even worth less than what it was when you purchased it. Maybe you have no line of sight on more favourable market conditions. How do you retire off that?

The Alaska Longline Fishermen's Association and the Cape Cod Commercial Fishermen's Alliance are partnering with Catch Together, a network of community permit banks and a fisheries impact investor, to innovate what we believe to be the second iteration of permit banks: community-owned fishing co-operatives. These give fishermen more control over quota. In addition to access, co-operative members have the right to decide how allocation within the shared business works, the right to decide who is in or out of the co-operative, and who has access to quota next (for example, the next generation of fishermen in their community). Lease fees continue to, in part, fund non-profit community fishing organizations, but they also go into a pool for co-operative members to decide how to spend. For example,

a particularly forward-looking investment would be to purchase additional quota to generate more revenue for the collective business, creating a rising tide that creates more jobs, and lifts all boats.

In the co-operative model, members typically engage in profit sharing, that is, they can earn annual dividends based on use. In a quota-holding co-operative, this could allow fishermen to benefit financially from quota while they fish it, rather than betting on the market to be healthy when they are ready to sell out. Since there is less need to buy and sell quota on the outside market, members are effectively shielded (at least partially) from market volatility. Just look at the members of the Seafood Producers Co-operative, a processing co-operative in Sitka, for example: during market highs, the members may look like any other fishermen selling to a traditional processor. Last fall, however, when the market fell and most processors stopped buying, the co-operative members were the only ones who were able to sell their fish.

### Stable future

This spring, the Alaska Sustainable Fisheries Trust began community outreach to assess the loss of access to fisheries in southeast communities and generate ideas about potential co-operative solutions. In Alaska, the model is simple: when rural communities and Alaska Natives have control over their local fisheries, they promote a sustainable, food-secure, and economically stable future that honours the customary tenure of fishermen past. 

#### For more

##### **Southeast Sustainable Partnership**

<https://sustainablesoutheast.net/>

##### **Alaska Longline Fishermen's Association**

<https://www.alfafish.org/>

##### **Learn more about permit banking in the U.S.**

<https://capecodfishermen.org/fisheries-trust/>

##### **Learn more about individually-allocated fishing rights**

<https://fisherysolutionscenter.edf.org/build-knowledge/sustainable-fisheries/individually-allocated-fishing-rights>

##### **Fishing is Life**

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##### **Alaska's empty nets, ageing fleets**

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