

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Lobster fishery still important to southwest coast

Dear Editor,

I am writing in response to a recent article in The Gulf News about a workshop held in Port aux Basques on November 5 regarding some potential alternative ways to achieve more sustainable livelihoods in the southwest coast lobster fishery. I am writing on behalf of the southwest coast Sustainable Lobster Fishery Committee. The Committee was established for the purpose of this project and it is currently composed of fish harvesters, Memorial university researchers, a representative of the local economic development board and of the Fish Food and Allied Workers Union. Harvesters, researchers, policy makers, processors and buyers were invited to the workshop. We are grateful for your coverage of our event and we would like to take this opportunity to add to the information contained in your article.

The local fishery is important not only to fishermen and their families, but also to the food security and economic resilience of most communities in this region, including Port aux Basques. The lobster fishery is a key contributor to harvesters' incomes despite low prices because the region is currently benefiting from high landings per harvester. It is not clear how long these high landings will last, however, and very few young people are entering the fishery in this area. If we cannot improve the longer-term economic viability of the lobster and other fisheries, many harvesters in the region will be forced out of the industry and, even if they survive, most will retire in the not too distant future. Their departure will jeopardize local jobs in buying, processing and in the transport of lobster and other fishery resources. Loss of the local fishery also has the potential to negatively affect access to lobster and other fish as a source of healthy, locally-produced food and for use in the tourism sector.

As discussed at our recent workshop, Memorial University researchers have been doing research on the effectiveness of the many lobster conservation initiatives undertaken by harvesters in recent years. Their preliminary findings suggest that these initia-

tives have contributed to the sustainability of the resource. These investments in sustainability are not, however, currently reflected in lobster prices to the degree that they might be.

Harvesters and others in other parts of Canada and Newfoundland have also been experimenting with ways to improve the potential for small scale fisheries to produce more sustainable livelihoods. Discussions of these alternatives and lessons learned from elsewhere were the main focus of the workshop presentations.

One of the options discussed at the workshop was the idea of a community supported fishery. The Off the Hook initiative in Nova Scotia is a community-supported fishery that was started this year. Although small, it has been quite successful and has contributed to better incomes for harvesters. With a community-supported fishery, customers essentially invest in the fish harvesting enterprise by purchasing a catch share in the spring in return for which they receive a weekly delivery of fresh seafood. The price is negotiated at the beginning of the season and is set to be fair for customers and fishermen. Upfront payment gives the harvesters a guaranteed market and the funds they need to pay the costs of fishing (or at least some of them). While these fisheries can only absorb a portion of the local landings, they can contribute substantially to incomes in some cases and to the viability of the enterprise, while also creating a strong and interested local and regional customer base.

On the southwest coast, as elsewhere in Newfoundland, the fisheries and tourism industries have developed largely in isolation without the help of programs of research and development designed to promote synergies between the two sectors. The Community-University Research for Recovery Alliance, which funded the southwest coast workshop, is currently developing a research proposal to identify and promote such synergies in the Bonne Bay area working with harvesters, tourism operators and with a processor/retailer. As the marine/road transport gateway into Newfoundland, Port aux Basques, like Bonne Bay, has the potential to benefit from research

into ways to achieve stronger synergies between fisheries and tourism as well.

On Fogo Island, fishermen receive a premium price for cod caught in cod pots, processed by the local cooperative and then sold to restaurants in St. John's, Fogo and Ottawa. This past summer, the restaurants paid \$5.00 a

pound for skin-on fillet, the fishermen received \$1.25 a pound for their cod at the wharf and the processor received the difference to cover costs and allow a margin of profit. The fishermen who caught the cod are identified on the restaurant menus. The high quality hook and line fish from the southwest coast has the potential to feed into a market of this kind.

Some areas are trying seafood festivals and Christmas lobster sales - also potential options for the region and ways to generate and hold more wealth from the fishery in the hands of local harvesters and others. Seafood promotion events could encourage the sale of local fish to tourists and locals alike, and could teach us all a little more about the cultural and economic significance of the fishery on the southwest coast. These are just some of the options that are under discussion.

The Committee is currently exploring appropriate next steps in light of the information learned at the workshop. We would love to hear from others in the Port aux Basques area who would like to be involved in discussing some of these ideas further. Please feel free to contact us at 709 864-7244 or bneis@mun.ca

Sincerely,
Katie Temple
on behalf of the Southwest
Coast Lobster Workshop Planning
Committee