

## Gut DFO Like a Cod

ISLE MADAME, NS –

If I did something that cost the people of Canada 10,000 jobs and a billion dollars, I'd expect to be jailed. Or sued. Or fired. Or reprimanded.

Or... something.

So what's going to happen to management at the federal Department of Fisheries and Oceans?

In 1992, say the scientists, the best scientific information about the Atlantic cod stocks was "gruesomely mangled and corrupted to meet political ends." (The quotation comes from an internal DFO report.) The Minister had already decided to close the Northern cod fishery off Newfoundland for two years because the stocks had fallen so low. But the scientists knew that stocks elsewhere -- in southern Newfoundland and the Gulf of St. Lawrence, and on the Scotian Shelf -- were equally ravaged.. They intended to tell that to the Atlantic Groundfish Advisory Committee, which in turn would advise the Minister.

No, said the bureaucrats, we're only talking about Northern cod. Scientists who saw the resulting document "wondered what had happened to their conclusions."

So the three imperilled stocks were fished for another year. This, says Dr. Ransom Myers of Dalhousie University, then a DFO researcher, "allowed most of the remaining fish to be caught in these areas and directly caused the collapse of these stocks. The cost to Canadians was over 10,000 jobs and almost a billion dollars" to support unemployed fisheries workers.

Myers is no marginal figure; he has been called "the best fish scientist in Canada" by his peers. And he is not alone. The House of Commons Fisheries Committee has been holding hearings into the treatment of science within DFO, and scientist after scientist has testified to the committee about gag orders, intimidation, suppression and outright distortion of research.

There was no scientific basis for a two-year moratorium on Northern cod, for instance. The breeding cycle of a codfish is seven years, and in other cases of stock collapse -- the California sardine fishery, for example -- recovery has taken 20 or 25 years. A two-year moratorium implies that the stock will soon recover. It won't. But Newfoundland families and communities still think the fishery will return in their lifetimes.

Again, DFO would have us believe that the stocks collapsed because of seal predation and pillaging by foreign fishermen, and that it's safe to fish off the isolated mid-Atlantic seamount called Flemish Cap. The best empirical evidence says that none of these contentions is true; the fishery, for instance, collapsed because of overfishing, mostly by Canadians. But, say the scientists, at DFO evidence is adjusted to fit policy, not the other way around.

"It sounds silly when you say it out loud," Ransom Myers admits, "but they seemed to have a notion that you could sit in Ottawa and *make up* reality. If you could enforce a scientific consensus, that would *be* reality."

For years, fishermen have claimed that DFO was grossly mismanaging the fishery; the current hearings reveal that they were right, just as they were right about the disappearance of inshore cod stocks. If I were an Atlantic premier, I'd sue the feds. If I were a fisherman or a processor, I'd launch a class-action suit. Heads should be rolling in Ottawa. But they aren't.

The basic problem, says Newfoundland MP George Baker, who chairs the Commons Committee, is that Canada's legislation has created "an Ayatollah of Fish," a Minister who doesn't necessarily know anything about fish, but who can do anything he chooses. In the US, the ability of a politician to overrule scientific evidence is severely constrained; in Australia it's completely prohibited. But the Canadian Minister can ignore research, suppress unwelcome findings, or do whatever it takes to get through the next election, regardless of long-term consequences. If he wants, he can close all the fisheries research stations in Atlantic Canada -- and he has. We've downsized exactly the wrong thing.

All of which raises an even larger question. The Atlantic cod fishery got along fine for 500 years before DFO was given the task of ensuring its sustainability. Now DFO has 800 bureaucrats in Ottawa – more bureaucrats than there are fishermen in most fishing communities – and the fish are gone.

Has any organization in our history ever failed more appallingly, or with more catastrophic consequences? Will DFO simply be allowed to continue unscathed? Why are we paying for this vast apparatus?

The Committee hearings are a good start. But this situation calls for truly drastic action. Criminal charges. (Is this not criminal negligence?) Or Royal Commissions. Or firings, suspensions, demotions, reprimands.

Or ... something.