

Private fisheries won't work

BY DAVID LAVIGNE

We have a serious problem with fisheries in this country. Anyone who has been reading the *Ottawa Citizen* over the past few weeks will understand a large part of the problem: repeated failures in fisheries management, due in part to a failure by government bureaucrats and politicians to heed scientific advice and to learn from the past — a common tendency of governments, which the late historian, Barbara Tuchman, called "wooden-headedness."

Appropriately, the *Citizen* has begun to discuss remedies, first in an editorial ("Fishy Science," June 26) and then in an opinion piece by Elizabeth Brubaker, executive director of Environment Probe ("How to save fish ... and fishers," July 8). In both cases, the proposed solution to the fisheries crisis (and perhaps to our environmental problems generally) is "privatization."

This is analogous to suggesting that the solution to a car with a flat tire is to give away the car.

The first problem in implementing privatization is defining the resource to be privatized. Is it a single species such as Atlantic cod? Or Atlantic cod and its habitat? Or the entire ecosystem in which cod is found, including its prey species, predators and the many components that have no immediate or obvious economic value.

Assuming we can define the nature of the resource, the next problem is determining its geographical limits. This is not unique to the privatization solution; it is a major issue in resource management generally. One of the greatest difficulties in the current Pacific salmon war arises because fish do not respect international boundaries (or boundaries of any kind).

So exactly which fish are we going to privatize in Canada and, in the case of salmon stocks, do we really believe that the U.S. will agree with any decision we might make?

The third problem is deciding who gets the resource, however we define it. Should we give up our collective ownership to the original inhabitants of this land, the aboriginal peoples? Or, do we give it to the greatest number for (what some might call) the greatest good; namely, to Canadian sport fishers and tourist outfitters catering to fishers from both Canada and abroad? Or, do we give it to commercial fishers, the ones who would perhaps produce the greatest contribution to the GNP?

Perhaps logging interests or the hydro industry would also like some of the action, and will demand ownership of certain rivers in which the salmon spawn, to use for their own economic gain.

Who is going to play God and decide how to divvy up the spoils? Let's assume we can resolve all of the above problems. Now, fishers of one sort or another own the "resource." Neconservative theory suggests that with "clear property rights" fishers will now have an interest in protecting the fish and their habitat.

That might happen initially, at least on a small scale, but the fish are highly mobile and competition will surely arise between the various resource owners. Some will be more successful than others and, because property rights are "transferable ... efficient managers will," as Ms Brubaker notes, "buy out bad managers, ensuring that the rights end up in the hands of those who can make the best use of them."

I'm not sure what making "best use of them" really means; regardless, over time, ownership will become the exclusive right of a privileged few. And, if current economic models pertain, we can speculate that it will eventually end up in the hands of big business, probably some large multinational corporation.

These are the same folks who run the World Trade Organization, which works to undermine virtually any legislation designed to protect animals or the environment, because such pro-



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Canada has two options for the problem or give away the resource

regional trade agreements, limited to free trade.

The interest of large corporations is not in conserving fish stocks and their habitats or maximizing the number of jobs. They have no interest in the large majority of sea species which are important components of marine ecosystems but have no immediate economic value. No, their sole *raison d'être* is to maximize profits.

Their interests, therefore, might well be served best by maximizing short-term economic gain by aggressively exploiting a fish stock and racking up large quarterly gains, rather than putting up with the longer-term uncertainty of exploiting a natural resource in an ecologically sustainable fashion.

And, if the fish stock becomes over-exploited, they can simply move on to other stocks or industries, leaving not only a depleted fishery but also ravaged habitats and unemployed fishers in their wake.

With the collapse of the cod stocks and the massive unemployment in Newfoundland, where is Fisheries Products International, the once largely government-owned corporation that participated in the depletion of cod? It is doing just fine, thank you, busy completing its "transition from a Newfoundland fishing company to an international seafood enterprise." In 1996, it reported net earnings of \$6.1 million.

Meanwhile, we, the Canadian taxpayers, are left to pay the bill for The Atlantic Groundfish Strategy or TAGS program, which now supports unemployed fishers and processing plant workers in Newfoundland.

If the privatization solution has any substance at all, it only holds when the resource in question promises to produce profits well into the future. But because consumers are fickle, some resources will inevitably fall out of economic favour. What happens then?

Well, history tells us that the owners quickly lose interest in the resource as well as any concern for its future. Witness the dozens of domestic livestock breeds — and their unique genetic information — that are now endan-

gered. Clearly privatization has not ensured their future.

We often forget that in terrestrial environments, Canada, together with the U.S., has developed a system of sustainable wildlife management that is unrivalled in the world. That system is not based on privatization but rather on its very antithesis.

It is based principally on public ownership, managed in trust by governments, and on the allocation of benefits by law — not by the marketplace, birthright, land ownership or social position.

Unlike some European ecosystems, all Canadians — from unemployed worker to aristocrat — can enjoy wildlife; they can even hunt it if they wish, as equals. Contrast this with some European systems, where wildlife belong to an élite few, and access is denied to the majority.

And if Canadian government bureaucrats continue, as Ms. Brubaker suggests, to be rewarded for their "inaction" and continue to "license and subsidize polluters," or otherwise fail to live up to our expectations, the solution is obvious. Make the government change its ways. Failing that, change the government.

The "tools" required to achieve such change are in our hands. U.S. Vice-President Al Gore put it well just prior to the 1992 presidential election: "When enough people insist upon change to embolden the politicians to break away from the short-term perspective," Mr. Gore noted, "the political system will fall over itself to respond to this just demand that we save the environment for future generations."

We have two options. We can either fix the problem or give away the resource. The choice we make will determine the kind of world we live in; it will also determine the kind of world we leave to our children and grandchildren.

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