

How Catch Share Programs Benefit Small Scale Fishermen

It surprises many that local, small scale and artisanal fishing communities thrive under a well-designed system of secure and equitably distributed access privileges. Yet these are the very fishermen for whom catch shares first evolved. 'Modern' programs have roots in traditions of coastal communities who found practical ways to reduce conflict and waste while fairly allocating and valuing finite resources. Political economists and anthropologists like the late Nobel Laureate Elinor Ostrom have documented their spontaneous emergence in diverse fisheries. Each is unique; all share certain patterns. These include clearly defined boundaries, known rules, recognized tenure, self-imposed sanctions, customary laws, internal exchanges. Fiji's fishing groups formed *goligo*, self-organized and self-enforced tenure system still active today. Japan's *ainu* organize native fisheries in ways that date to the feudal era. Spatial, territorial and place-based catch share systems evolved globally for the benefit of small scale fishermen from Chile to the Gulf of Maine to the lakeshores of Eastern Africa to the seashores of India.

These deep and wide examples of ancient practice ensure catch shares can build on a secure foundation of tradition. They provide a better opportunity than top-down regulatory systems for equitable distribution of access to fishery resources. Instead of rewarding those few blessed with capital, catch shares hold opportunity for most stakeholders without. Indeed, smart and participatory catch share design can – and already does – ensure equity for all by protecting and promoting certain small scale constituents as part of the overriding program goal, right from the start.

Legitimate concerns about 'fair' allocation tend to be a legacy from the old broken regulatory system, in which equity was lacking, and where small-scale local fishermen had to keep racing for a dwindling slice, of a shrinking supply base, against larger and faster vessels from a distant port. Under open access, Cape Cod's hook and line fishermen were failing to compete with better equipped trawlers, but a secure and scientifically accountable quota created a sector cooperative: one that leveled the playing field.

Catch shares are more democratic. Collective management allocates privileges of, by, for, and within communities as a way to redress past inequality. Hence under catch share programs, native Maori now hold tenure over half of New Zealand's fish ; remote Native Americans along the coast of our largest State hold a fifth of all fish under catch shares in Alaska's Community Development Quota.

Even quota trading rules often benefit small scale fishermen. Alaskans designed their catch share exchanges for halibut and sablefish so that smaller-boat fishermen can purchase or lease shares from exiting larger vessels at a fair price – but not vice versa. Other catch shares set aside quota for the community, holding back shares as a social safety net for certain at risk fishermen as a buffer to build local resilience to external climatic and market forces.

Rather than break with the past, catch shares embrace proven traditions, restoring what for centuries has worked to benefit the indigenous experience of local fishermen with an equitable stake in the long term value of their fishery. As with fish, so with the small scale families who fish them: what robust health the rise of big, industrial global forces nearly eradicated, catch shares put firmly back into place.