

How fishing rights increase the power of other solutions

When fishermen and women have secure rights to fish and they experience the benefits of sustainable fishing, their motivations are transformed. Instead of competing to catch the most fish, they begin to cooperate with one another, NGOs, regulators and scientists to advance the full suite of solutions needed to restore thriving oceans. We have seen this happen time and time again as fishing rights take hold.

The Pacific groundfish fishery—the largest fishery on the U.S. West Coast—provides a case study of how fishing rights help create an upward spiral. In 2000, this fishery was on the verge of collapse, and the federal government declared it a disaster. Today the same fishery has rebounded, providing enough sustainable fish to satisfy 17 million Americans for an entire year.

Fishing communities become partners in setting and enforcing fishing rules:

Environmental Defense Fund (EDF) started working with fishermen, fishery managers and local stakeholders to rebuild the Pacific groundfish fishery in 2003. Together, we designed a fishing rights plan that fishery managers adopted in 2008. It went into operation in 2011. Fishermen were central to helping determine sustainable catch limits and appropriate shares of the catch.

This is a complex fishery comprising more than 70 bottom-dwelling species that often share habitat, including popular commercial varieties of rockfish, sole and whiting. Under the old rules, discarding was a common practice—fishermen who caught too many of a certain species or the wrong species were forced to toss them overboard. “I’ll never forget the day when I saw a carpet of dead fish as big as a football field,” says fisherman Joe Pennisi. “The culprit was senseless regulations.”

With fishing rights, if a fisherman catches more than his share, he can buy quota from others, still keeping the total catch within the scientifically determined limit. And fishermen who once fiercely competed now share information to avoid overfished species. The discard rate in this fishery has plummeted 75% with secure fishing rights, bringing the total discards down to about 5% of the catch—a very low number given the size of the fishery and the diversity of species.

Fishermen here also supported having human observers aboard each boat, ensuring that every fish caught is accounted for. The system has proven expensive to maintain, however; so today the Pacific fishing community is leading the way again—piloting more affordable electronic monitoring using video cameras. People here once resisted any monitoring of their practices—today they welcome and encourage it because it’s in their interest to ensure that everyone stays within catch limits.

Fishing communities support science and innovation: A common way of catching groundfish involves dragging heavy trawls along the ocean bottom, which can damage habitat. The fishing community here is invested in the long-term health of the fishery, so some of its leaders started looking for new ways to fish. Captain Pennisi partnered with EDF to design a light-trawl net that floats above the sea floor, which avoids sensitive habitat and also lowers his fuel costs. Other fishermen are switching to long-lines and pots and abandoning trawl-gear completely.

Fishermen also have been experimenting with new net designs to limit catches of depleted species. As a result of this and other gear and behavior innovations, the catch of overfished species has remained well below fleet-wide quotas, and species are rebuilding much more quickly than initially projected. One species, the canary rockfish, has recovered 40 years ahead of schedule!

Fishing communities seek markets for sustainable fish: The turnaround in the Pacific groundfish fishery has spurred fishermen to invest in new marketing approaches and seek out certifications that will reward them for sustainable practices. In 2014, the Monterey Bay Aquarium’s popular Seafood Selector guide upgraded the sustainability rating of 21 species of rockfish, sole and other groundfish from this fishery, and the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) certified 13 of the main species in the fishery as sustainable through its rigorous certification process.

The recognition provides new markets for fishing communities and more sustainable, wild caught seafood for people to enjoy. EDF is working with fishing communities in Belize, Mexico and elsewhere to help them increase their incomes by gaining access to markets that reward sustainable fishing practices.

Fishing communities become advocates for other ocean conservation measures: In 2015, something truly momentous happened. Pacific groundfish fishermen from Washington to California joined EDF and other environmental groups to lead an initiative aimed at closing certain areas to fishing as part of a coast-wide management plan. Under the old system, this never would have happened, because poorly designed regulations forced fishermen to compete with each other to catch as many fish as possible as quickly as possible. Now, with secure fishing rights, stewarding the health of the fishery for the long term is in everyone’s best interest.

Through hundreds of hours of discussion over dozens of meetings in every trawl port on the coast, the NGO-industry group developed a proposal to designate more than 100 new areas as “essential fish habitat” closed to fishing, protecting over 20,000 square miles—an area more than twice the size of New Jersey.

Because fishermen, EDF and other NGOs have worked together to rebuild the fishery, fishermen trusted the collaborative process enough to share knowledge of important seafloor habitats that is in many cases more detailed and accurate than the government’s. That data allowed the group to tailor the recommended closures around important vulnerable habitats, like high-profile rocky reefs.

At the same time, the proposal would reopen to fishing roughly 7,000 square miles of less sensitive habitat (soft sediments that are less vulnerable to trawling) to ensure that this responsible, sustainable fishery can thrive for years to come.