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CRIB NOTES

Teetering Towards Economic Sustainability: Alternatives for Commercial Fishermen

BARBARA JONES

Abstract

Sustainable fishing has become a challenging problem for commercial fishermen all over the world. Many efforts to pursue a livelihood based on commercially harvesting fish suffer from catch limits and closings intended to protect diminishing fish resources; rising prices for waterfront real estate that currently houses their home ports; and competition from recreational fishermen. In order to continue a commercial fishing way of life, fishermen are resorting to what they are told represent economic sustainable alternatives to fishing, including aquaculture, retail markets, educational/museum facilities, restaurants, and parks. Yet, can a fisherman remain a fisherman if he is seen as an 'artist in residence' in an educational facility or a farmer tending his tilapia? Are these truly economically sustainable alternatives to fishing or merely ways of maintaining a visceral connection to our maritime heritage and as such offer little to the fishermen in terms of maintaining their way of life? This paper explores a case study with fishermen in Belford, New Jersey, and suggests fisherman can be willing to become part of a new vision for the area and how some are surprisingly comfortable with the creation of an educational museum facility as a way to keep fishing in Belford.

Introduction

This article is about how natural resource users, in this case fishermen, might address changing economic and ecological conditions with their culture and dignity still intact. As a way to protect and promote their culturally and environmentally meaningful spaces before these unique settings disappear, communities throughout the world are creating cultural tourism (Brassiuer 2005; Duggan 1990), agrotourism (Busby and Rendle 2000) and ethical ecotourism (Wearing, Archer, and Jackson 2003) partnerships. These experience-driven tourism partnerships tend to encourage a sense of environmental and social responsibility because they place the visitor's experiences in a socio-cultural context, thus potentially promoting the preservation and protection of unique cultural, as well as ecological landscapes. Natural resource-dependent communities that rely on resource extraction like

forestry, commercial fishing or agriculture are faced with the need to consider such alternative strategies for resource management as they struggle to redefine themselves for the 21st century.

Commercial fishing is a resource-dependent industry that operates within an ecosystem with tremendous socio-cultural appeal because the industry is water dependent. For many people living in these water-dependent communities near working fish ports, there is the feeling, exemplified by one fisherman, that "it is important to protect the cultural heritage of the waterfronts *and* [at the same time] to make a living doing it." Recognizing the multiplier effect that commercial fishing has on local economies, it becomes clear that communities feel great pressures to develop alternative sources of income for commercial fishermen.

These alternative livelihoods should not be confused with a “complete switch from one livelihood activity to another, but the ability to adopt multiple alternatives and options” (Howard 2003:22). This notion of economic alternatives has always existed for inshore commercial fishermen who make their living following a seasonal rotation. This seasonal rotation has been called a variety of things, but is commonly understood as following the cycle or following the bay (Harris and Reyes 1991; McCay 1984). Following the bay is an economic strategy that allows fishermen the flexibility to participate in a wide variety of economic activities that include estuarine, agricultural and even non-fishing occupations, often on a seasonal basis. As part of this seasonal pattern of work, fishermen might drive an oil truck or build fences for a construction company in the winter and then return in the spring to catch eels or harvest clams. This seasonal pattern of work has the potential to work well with a cultural tourism model and could become part of what some have proposed as a new paradigm for commercial fishing. This new paradigm mirrors the notion of multiple alternatives in that, while commercial fishing must remain an integral part of any new plan, additional opportunities need to be considered to improve the overall baseline economy of the port (Kavanaugh and Flimlin nd.).

According to Betty Duggan (2005) in her work on cultural heritage tourism, more than half of all US states have cultural or heritage tourism programs and internationally even the most remote places are reconnecting to their cultural heritage and environment to generate dollars from tourism. Brassiuer’s (2005) work with public boat building in Louisiana demonstrates the cultural appeal of what he describes as waterborne cultural and eco-tourism, while Roberts’ work in the Gambia (Meatyrd et al. 2005) indicated that tourism is the top earner of foreign currency for Gambia, and jobs in formal and informal sectors are tied to the tourism’s annual rhythm. In an example involving an overt partnership after closure of the cod fishery, the Canadian government encouraged the development of a tourism industry to help provide an alternative livelihood for cod fishermen. As a result, from 1992 to 2002, after

spending money on product development, training and advertising to highlight the cultural, historical, and environmental features of Newfoundland and Labrador, the number of tourists to the region increased 40 percent (Howard 2003).

Belford, New Jersey

Belford, a traditional inshore commercial fish port that sits along the Raritan Bay across from New York City in New Jersey, is one of the oldest commercial fish ports on the East coast and is currently facing tremendous pressure to redefine itself. For almost one-hundred years, Belford was the home of a large menhaden fish processing plant and a fleet of purse seiners, as well as the 300 men who worked the 125 pound nets that covered Raritan Bay. This way of life ended in the 1980s with the closing of the fish plant and, since then, Belford fishermen have struggled in various ways to continue as commercial fishermen.

As part of an economic feasibility study and conceptual development plan for the Port of Belford, tremendous effort has been expended to suggest ways to remake the port following its downward spiral away from the hey day of commercial fishing to the plight of commercial fishermen there today (Louis Berger Group et al. 2008). Not only are fishermen being driven out of fishing because of catch limits and closings, but they can no longer, in many cases, afford to maintain the highly prized waterfront property that supports their way of life. This situation is evidenced in the proliferation of alternatives to the maritime way of life around the US coasts, in the form of museums, aquaculture facilities, retail markets, and open space. These solutions are offered as sustainable alternatives for many fishermen in an effort to help them morph into “artists in residence” in museums and farmers in aquaculture facilities.

Although it might be unusual to imagine commercial fishermen as docents or educators, the possible changes to the Port of Belford include capitalizing on the port’s 100-year old commercial fishing tradition through the development of an educational/interactive museum facility that highlights the region’s maritime heritage. Its lack of a

recreational (head/party boat) fishing presence and because so much of the waterfront in Belford was owned by J. Howard Smith's fish factory, Belford became what Shelly Drummond of the Tuckerton Baymen's Museum in South Jersey, called a "truly preserved area" (Louis Berger Group et al. 2008:26), and as such is well positioned to generate dollars from its unique cultural heritage.

Alternatives to Commercial Fishing: An Education or Museum Facility

Belford fishermen seem particularly fond of the educational/museum alternative because they see themselves growing into an 'artist in residence' position as they move through their life cycle as fishermen. This willingness to accept an alternative to fishing, particularly one that requires fishermen to interact with outsiders and to share their fishing space is, to many who know fishers, truly amazing. The feeling among Belford fishermen, stated by one of their own as "fishermen are an endangered species along the Bayshore" because they are a "cultural icon that is not cherished by the community" displays their wariness about partnering with others.

Commercial fishermen, particularly those operating out of Belford, tend to be very reticent about exposing themselves and their lives to outsiders. These men historically cherished their anonymity and antisocial ways, such that being called a bootlegger or a pirate were considered compliments. One fisherman proudly described how in the old days they had what he called pirate season, in that the men would power dredge for clams with a "rocking chair" instead of hand dredging them as the law required. They also were known to use illegal otter-trawls to drag the bay for fluke and to sell short lobsters. These piratical behaviors were a response to a decline in the number of porgies and menhaden Belford men had relied on in the 1960s and 1970s to make a living (McCay 1984), and an increase in regulations and enforcement agents that the fishermen saw as tools outsiders used to limit their right to fish. Both the decrease in available fish and the increase in regulatory oversight encouraged a tough and edgy reputation to take root.

But, by the late 1990s and early into the 21st century, many Belford fishermen were beginning to realize they needed to be more political, or as one warden put it, "more aware of the need to play the game." A new way of thinking took root in Belford, one that now includes a greater willingness to participate in the political process and to accept some change. This new way of thinking has the potential to integrate the older fishermen, who have more time and are less driven to actually fish, to participate in a process that can protect their interests. To them, an educational/museum tourist driven facility could educate people about the value of fishing to the region and with that the opportunity, as one fisherman said, to stay "in fishing until I can't walk no more".

This need to stay close to fishing and its ability to complement their existing seasonal rotation makes the development of an educational/museum facility an appealing solution to the changes that are going on within commercial fishing. One fisherman, who historically fished out of Belford and now works for a maritime museum in South Jersey, sees his role as an artist in residence and teacher in a very positive way. According to him, "I can relate to people and tell them what fishing is all about". He also sees the potential for educating children to be very valuable because by teaching children about the value of commercial fishing, attitudes in the community might change.

Other waterfront communities are capitalizing on their heritage to create similar museum facilities. In North Carolina, the goal of the Core Sound Waterfowl Museum is to not only provide the local craftsmen with an outlet for their traditional crafts, but to remind the community of the importance and the need to protect the region's natural resources and traditions that make up their coastal way of life. Shelly Drummond believes using Belford fishermen as local experts would be helpful for succession planning, in that the men who mend the fishnets now and still fish could become part of the educational process, such that "their knowledge could provide visitors with a window into the days of factory boats, the railroad, tar pots, and even piracy" (Louis Berger Group et al. 2008:26).

One problem some see with this succession planning is the authenticity of the participants. Chanty singers, men from Virginia and North Carolina who traveled up to New Jersey during the peak years of the factory fishing era and sang as they hauled in the nets for the fish factory boats, are an example of the importance of authenticity. These men who still sing the chanty songs are now between 66 and 84 years old, yet they believe in order to sing the songs you have to be someone who has pulled the nets. William Hudnall, a retired net hauler from the 1930s, says, "there is only one way to keep it genuine. People have asked if we would pass the songs on, and we say no, because if you hadn't actually worked pulling those nets by hand, you couldn't really appreciate what the songs meant and the chanting wouldn't be genuine" (Sherrod 2000). Some admit that in time though, there will have to be a mix-and-match approach in that some singers might learn the songs without ever having experienced life on the water. Will this mix-and-match approach jeopardize their sense of history and how the stories they convey through song are understood and interpreted?

In 2002, the Columbia River Maritime Museum in Astoria, Oregon expanded their forty year old facility to incorporate interactive exhibits into their museum space. Visitors use cutting edge technology, touchable exhibits and interviews to experience what it was like to live and work on the river. They can pilot a tugboat, participate in a Coast Guard rescue or live in Astoria as a salmon fisherman. For museums today, these types of interactive tourist experiences (see MacCannell 1999; Norkura 1993) are essential. Not only do they provide the visitor with the experience, but they engage them in a way of life. Just as farmers incorporate harvest tours and hay wagon rides to their fields, fishermen can encourage people to experience life on the ocean. In Tuckerton, one local clammer, when he is not out clamming, offers boat trips out on the bay. These trips work well with his clamming schedule and they provide him with both an additional source of income and a way to share his intimate knowledge of the bay to visitors.

In addition to a museum, other experience-driven tourist ideas include building an outdoor band shell or auditorium for summer concerts and movies,

holding maritime flavored festivals, and encouraging water-based activities like canoeing, kayaking and recreational fishing. For Belford, encouraging an outdoor water sport culture that is associated with canoeing or kayaking has not met with tremendous success. The tendency of these fishermen to distrust outsiders has made the channels and waterways around Belford unattractive to any visitor intent on kayaking or canoeing. One avid kayaker and biker conveyed that a kayak rental on Compton's Creek would be a good way to share the property with the whole community. Currently, he kayaks on Compton's Creek, but he senses that "visitors are not welcome here." Right now there are only a handful of recreational users, but he believes if there "wasn't a feeling that you were trespassing on a fishing enterprise, you would feel more welcome and more recreational paddlers would come." Whether the fishermen want to share the property with the whole community is another challenge when considering alternatives for men who typically operate in a closed and somewhat suspicious fishing environment.

While aquaculture is too much like farming and as such has little appeal to commercial fishermen who like their freedom, the connection between an educational facility and an aquaculture facility should not be overlooked. Watching and learning about fish as they grow through their life cycle in tanks could provide visitors with a connection to both the biology of certain marine species and the need for sustainable alternatives to wild caught fish. There is even the possibility that commercial fishermen could provide some of the live fish that would be grown and maintained in an aquaculture facility. This connection might help make aquaculture seem less like farming and more like something they can incorporate into their cycle of working the bay.

Based on conversations with members of the Belford community and other maritime museums, some combination of a museum/educational facility has the potential to provide, by complementing an existing seasonal rotation, a legitimate alternative to commercial fishing. To the fishermen in Belford a museum/educational facility would not only celebrate the bay, but would also provide "a sense of continuity for those men and women who have

worked at Belford and continue to rely on the commercial fish port for their livelihood" (Louis Berger Group et al. 2008:27).

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