

Response to 'The Mi'kmaq free market lobster revolution'

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Hi everyone,

I had to respond to this National Post Article. Individual property rights in the form of individual transferable quotas (ITQs) (a fisheries management tool) has and is wreaking havoc on Atlantic Canadian Coastal Communities. I fear that it could do the same in Native Communities. In the nonnative fisheries, ITQs (or IQs - to me they are the same) have caused a very uneven distribution of wealth in coastal communities and has contributed greatly to the corporatization of fisheries.

Here is an example from NS.

Roughly 15 years ago a mid-size groundfish fleet went ITQ. Each license holder was given a permanent individual allocation (a percentage of the overall quota) based on their past fishing history - there were major problems with how history was determined and many people lost out there). The allocations were mostly too small to be worth rigging up to go fishing. Very soon, the more 'well-off' fishermen (some backed by corporate interests) began to buy out the quotas of the poorer fishermen. After only a few years, a fleet of many many independent fishermen became a corporate fleet all owned and controlled by a few large companies. I know the same thing happening in Australia and New Zealand. These companies own boats (now larger and very sophisticated), quota, processing plants, etc. Since then, the practices within this fishery have gone down hill. Distant shore-based company owners demand that each boat make the maximum amount of money possible which often translates to dumping and discarding fish (miles of floating dead fish have been observed near these boats time and time again). And when a crew member or independent fisherman calls attention to the destruction, he is fired or blacklisted by the company - often the only fish buyer in the community. One fisherman was unable to sell his handline-caught fish for an entire season after he reported a massive dumping episode.

This summer one of these companies sold out their quota to the federal government in the latest round of buybacks. Inshore fishermen in the whole

Bay of Fundy celebrated and thought they would be rid of the environmental destruction this particular company was known for. Well, it turned out that the company sold their quota at 1.5X's the going rate. The quota is expected to or has already gone to a Mi'kmaq community in Cape Breton, and the company plans to lease the quota back at a cheaper rate. Sure the Mi'kmaq community is making some money, but the company is making even more money than before. In my opinion, individual property rights in fisheries feed the corporate culture. Perhaps Native communities can make it work to their advantage. But there is a real risk of creating a system which breeds economic inequality within native communities similar to that which plagues non-native coastal communities. It is possible that both DFO and corporate fishing interests are hoping that Native communities will choose individual property rights, then the corporations will try to capitalize on the gains of Native people.

I hope this is comprehensible. If any one wants to discuss this further, please contact me.

Thanks,
Maria