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## Fishing with Big Brother

To enforce limits on how much fishermen like John Our are catching, the government is testing out onboard cameras. Excessive? He actually welcomes the scrutiny.



Frustrated with the old catch limit system, Chatham fisherman John Our signed on to a new yearly quota system and allowed his boat, "Miss Fitz," to be outfitted with cameras that document what he brings in and prove that he's following the rules, as part of a pilot project. (Erik Jacobs for The Boston Globe)

By Cynthia Graber

July 12, 2009

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John Our drives a gleaming black Ford pickup truck with one bumper sticker plastered on the back in sharp white contrast. It reads, "National Marine Fisheries Service: Destroying fishermen and their communities since 1976." Our believes government scientists don't know as much about the ocean environment as they'd like to think and have created useless regulations. He blames them for the decline in fishing jobs. And yet Our may represent the government's latest and perhaps last hope in its efforts to save not just the fish in New England's sea but also the fishermen whose livelihoods they support.

JULY 12, 2009 COVER

The 47-year-old Our is tall and fit, with hair bleached strawberry blond and a faint sunburn streaking the bridge of his nose. He grew up by the same Chatham harbor that now houses his boat, the 42-foot Miss Fitz. His father worked these waters, says Our, and he saw the sea as an endless supply of bounty. Most fishermen in his

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father's day navigated the waters in wooden boats loaded with hand-baited hooks. They'd drop those to the bottom of the sea, and each hook would attract a single fish, usually one of the species in demand: cod, haddock, halibut.

When local fishermen started using gill nets instead of hooks -- nets that could drag in thousands of pounds of fish -- and when boat engines ramped up power and could travel farther, faster, the fishing scene devolved into "the Wild West," says Our. He remembers his father going out to sea with a shotgun when a dragger boat tried to sweep through his lobster traps. "He nearly killed the guy," Our says and laughs. Fishermen grabbed at the opportunity to scoop up as much as possible, as quickly as possible. But in a story well known to most New Englanders, and certainly to all the fishermen, the fish started to shrink in size and number, disappearing from waters where they had once been plentiful. Today, many commercial species in New England are considered "overexploited" and in danger of collapse.

"It's our fault," Our says. "I'll admit it."

But he also faults the government response. The National Marine Fisheries Service, charged with overseeing the fisheries, sought in 1994 to protect the stocks by limiting the days fishermen could go out and the total weight of fish they could bring back each day. This pitted government against fishermen: Federal officials created increasingly strict regulations, and fishermen invented methods of outsmarting those regulations. But when it came to weigh-ins at the dock, the numbers didn't lie. A fisherman might be restricted to 1,000 pounds, but his net could drag in 2,000 pounds, or 3,000, or 5,000. He'd often have to toss the rest -- many of them already dead -- back. "It killed me to have that kind of waste," says Our. Perhaps worst of all, many fish stocks were not recovering. [Continued...](#)



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