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## COMMUNITY SUPPORTED FISHERIES

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## Bringing Locally-Harvested Fish Home Again

By John Pappalardo

Fifteen years ago, long-line boats were a passing thought in New England's commercial fishing industry. It was more profitable to drag, so that's what most fishermen did. When it came to regulatory changes, as the majority, the draggers ran the show. However, in the mid-1990s, the Lower Cape fleet had many long-line and jig boats that were heavily dependent on cod. As a group, these fishermen had a nearly nonexistent voice at the table, but caught almost 20 percent of the cod in the region. It was time for things to change.

This group of hook fishermen first gathered in Harwich Town Hall in 1991 and then began meeting in local basements. They wanted to find a way to make this old-fashioned form of fishing both sustainable and profitable. They wanted a voice in the process and knew they stood a better chance if they spoke together.

This loosely-organized group of independent and autonomous fishermen created the Cape Cod Commercial Hook Fishermen's Association. Over the years, membership expanded, grant funding supported full time staff, and the non-profit organization built a reputation on its ability to create regulatory changes at the national and regional level that impacted fishermen at the local level. They did research with the region's scientists, created new opportunities for fishermen to catch haddock, and placed a local fisherman on the New England Fishery Management Council.

But even with these changes, Cape Cod fishermen were still in trouble. The codfish stocks off of Georges Bank—the lifeblood of the local fishing fleet—were still being depleted.

As this iconic fish struggled to recover, federal fisheries managers were implementing more and more restrictions aimed at restoring the fish populations. Fishermen were limited to a certain number of days at sea per year, and to a limited amount of fish per trip. On the one hand, the fishermen at the Hook believed in the need for sustainability to protect the resource for future generations. But on the other hand, the regulations were making it difficult for fishermen to conduct business. By 2003, many hook fishermen were only able to fish for 50 days a year—some less than a dozen—and bring home 1,000 pounds of cod per trip. If they caught more than 1,000 pounds, it was just thrown back overboard, wasted.

They needed to band together once again, in a different way, to make sure their

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businesses would survive. In 2004, they voluntarily formed the first sector in the region.

Under the sector system, the group of hook fisherman agreed to share an annual cod quota and stop fishing once the quota, or annual limit, was reached. They also had additional monitoring and accountability requirements. By agreeing to these new regulations, they had the flexibility to bring home as much cod as they could catch, increasing their efficiency and preventing wasted fish.

The gillnet fishermen in town, who were watching the sector pilot program closely, decided in 2006 to form their own sector. This year, as the sector form of management rolled out across New England, the hook and gillnet sectors combined to share annual limits of 17 different groundfish stocks. It has been a difficult transition—they have to report to the government early and often on any and all fishing trips—but the independent fishermen are learning to work together, to trade quota and to make sure that they all are able to keep their businesses afloat.

Even with this new system, however, there are some fishermen that have been priced out, as the cost of groundfish permits has skyrocketed in recent years. And as local fishermen have decided to sell out or retire, industrial fishing fleets with better access to capital and less sustainable fishing methods have been buying them up.

To combat this, in 2005, the Hook Association introduced the Cape Cod Fisheries Trust, a novel method of keeping the permits on Cape. The Trust raises money to buy these groundfish permits, as well as scallop quota. It then leases them back to qualifying Cape Cod fishermen at affordable rates, in exchange for their adherence to environmentally-friendly fishing practices.

As fishermen utilize these sustainable practices, they are becoming concerned with the need to bring these locally harvested fish to local consumers. The Hook Association has taken the first steps toward making this a reality. In July of this year, the Hook launched a market survey to determine the interest level on Cape Cod for some form of a Community Supported Fishery (CSF) and, if so, what one might look like.

Where do consumers typically get their seafood? How often do they typically eat seafood at home? If they could buy fresh, high-quality “day boat” seafood that was guaranteed to be from local fishermen, would they consider changing their buying habits?

But even with those answers in hand, even if the answer is an overwhelming “yes,” the real test will be if consumers—and fishermen—actually change those habits.

Cape Cod fishermen are used to sending their fish to auctions in Gloucester and other off-Cape ports, where at least they are guaranteed to sell. But to where, and at what price, they can't control.

Does it make sense for fishermen to promise consumers fish, when there is no guarantee that the weather will let them fish on the scheduled pick-up day? Are consumers willing to take those risks with fishermen and be flexible, willing to swap haddock for cod on the dinner table if that's the catch of the day?

Several fishermen are willing to gamble that they are. They believe that the connection to both the food and the food purveyor will be enough to make up for a system that will never be 100 percent guaranteed.

They would like to be able to tell you what they're catching, whether hook fishing for cod and haddock or harpooning for tuna. They'd even like to show you pictures, connect with you, make sure you know that what they're catching is as much for you as it is for them.

This is somewhere where we can all work together—the public, the fishermen and the Hook office.

A pilot program later this season will help guide future Cape Cod Community Supported Fisheries. They need you to invest, to care, to work with them. If you do, they can hopefully make this a fixture of the small-boat fishing fleet and bring Cape Cod fish back to Cape Cod.

They want to fish. They need to fish to make a living and feed their families. But they also want their sons and daughters, our grandsons and granddaughters, to be able to commercially fish if they want to. The only way to make sure this happens—to make sure there remains enough cod and haddock and tuna and flounder out there to feed New Englanders from their own waters—is for fishermen to be cognizant of the need to protect the marine environment.

At the Chatham Fish Pier every weekend during the summer, long-time fishermen explain the ins and outs of commercial fishing and tell visitors their own stories from the sea. The Hook's “Fisheries Trail” brochure provides a way for visitors to see some of the important fishing landmarks in Chatham. Ultimately, whether they're watching the fishermen unload or eating their fish, the Cape's residents and visitors need to be a part of that fishing industry to make sure it continues to be as storied as it once was.

Through managing sectors, buying permits under the Fisheries Trust, promoting sustainable fish through a CSF pilot and educating the public, the Cape Cod Commercial Hook Fishermen's Association has taken many steps in its nearly 20 years of existence to promote its unwavering mission: protecting a resource, a tradition and a way of life.

***Learn about fishing practices and hear stories from long-time fishermen every Saturday from noon-6:00 pm during September at the Chatham Fish Pier, 54 Barcliff Avenue Extension, Chatham. Check the Hook website for updates about the pilot CSF program at [www.ccchfa.org/programs/csf-pilot-program.htm](http://www.ccchfa.org/programs/csf-pilot-program.htm)***

*John Pappalardo is the chief executive officer of the Cape Cod Commercial Hook Fishermen's Association. John has seen all sides of the fishing industry, from crewing and clamming to serving on state, regional, federal and international boards to promote fishing interests*

[info@ediblecapecod.com](mailto:info@ediblecapecod.com) • 508-375-9883 • P.O. Box 515 • Cummaquid, MA 02637

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