

What's The Future Of Chatham's Fishing Fleet?

by **Tim Wood**

CHATHAM --- "Ever changing to remain the same."

Those words are engraved on the Fishermen's Monument at the town's fish pier, and serve as an apt description of Chatham's commercial fishing fleet over its long history. As fish stocks, gear types and even public tastes in seafood go up and down and in and out, fishermen here change and adapt and thus are able to survive.

It's not as easy to do anymore, however. The lucrative groundfish that built Chatham and the Cape's modern commercial fishing industry, especially cod, have all but disappeared, forcing fishermen to target less profitable, more labor-intensive species like dogfish and skate. Once open access fisheries, like sea scallops, are now restricted by highly structured federal regulations. Those and other factors make it harder and harder for the small boat fishermen that make up Chatham's fleet – the largest on the Cape – to follow the motto on the monument.

Depending upon who you ask, the outlook for Chatham's fishing fleet ranges from "uncertain" to "pretty bleak."

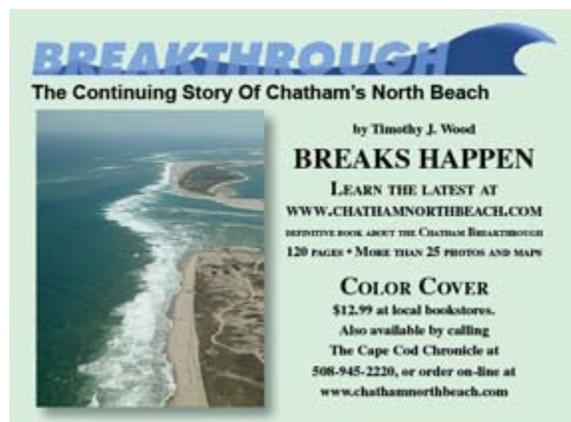
"The hope is that they'll always find a resource, a product to fish for, and continue as we have," said Harbormaster Stuart Smith. "But those options are becoming more and more difficult."

"I think there's going to be a lot of people leaving the fleet, one way or another," said Peter Taylor, a veteran fishermen who is now semi-retired. It's even hard to talk to his fellow fishermen about the industry, he said. "It's too depressing."

"Things look pretty bleak, I gotta tell you," said Taylor, who still fishes for dogfish occasionally.

Dogfish, skate wing and monkfish have become the mainstays of the town's fleet; last year, fishermen landed millions of pounds of the species at the pier, a huge increase over a decade ago. At the same time, cod, pollock, haddock and other groundfish landings have plummeted, not just because of federal catch limits but because the fish simply aren't there. Recently, the New England Fishery Management Council voted to reduce the U.S. quote of Georges Bank cod (the overall quota is shared with Canada) by 61 percent, from 5,013 metric tons last year to 2,002 metric

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Skate has become one of the staple species targeted by Chatham's commercial fishing fleet.

FILE PHOTO

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Fishing Future

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tons in 2013.

Less than 30 percent of last year's quota was caught, however.

"They're not there," Taylor said of the cod, which fetch a much higher price for fishermen than so-called "trash fish" like skate wing and dogfish.

Even though Chatham's fleet has a large sector allocation of Georges Bank cod, "nobody even approached it here," said fishermen John Our. There were some cod around last fall, but they disappeared after Hurricane Sandy. Whereas fishermen used to be able to spend half the year fishing for cod, now they're lucky if they get a few weeks.

"You can't get paid for codfish that you can't catch," said Tom Dempsey, policy director of the Cape Cod Commercial Hook Fishermen's Association and a member of the New England Fishery Management Council.

"The only thing that's saved our fleet is the adaptation to trash fish," Our said.

It's been years since the local fleet has depended on groundfish. Most fishermen "saw the writing on the wall" and switched to scalloping, mussels or sought out the growing biomass of dogfish and skate in the mid to late 2000s, said John Pappalardo, chief executive officers of the Hook Fishermen's Association.

Those signs can be seen in the figures for landings at the fish pier over the past decade. In 2003, more than 2.7 million pounds of groundfish were packed at the pier by the two resident packing companies. That figure fell to less than 700,000 pounds last year.

At the same time, the landings of the “trash fish” species, especially dogfish, soared. In 2004 fishermen landed 414,589 pounds of dogfish; in 2012, 3.3 million pounds of dogfish were packed. Skate wing remained stable; in 2003 1.9 million pounds were landed, compared to 1.8 million pounds last year. Monkfish landings actually decreased. The more recent figures are somewhat deceptive, however, since they do not include dogfish and skate wing that were landed and packed by fishermen at the south jog. Quite a few fishermen opt to do that now, since the margin on the species is so low that offloading and transporting the fish themselves – rather than paying a fee to the packing companies – is the only way they can turn a decent profit.

The overall amount of fish packed by the tenant packers at the pier was 7.4 million pounds in 2003. Last year that figure was 6.3 million pounds. The 14 percent drop may not seem overly drastic, but two-thirds of last year’s landings were skate wings and dogfish, both high-volume species. More telling is the 78 percent drop in cod landings.

Fishermen here began actively targeting dogfish in the mid 1990s. Later in the decade cod appeared to be rebounding, recalled fisherman Stuart Tolley, and at the same time federal regulators imposed drastic limits of 600 pounds per day on dogfish, basically shutting down the fishery out of concern that the species was being overfished. Scientists and regulators said it would take 17 years to rebuild the species, he said.

But within a few years, the dogfish population exploded. To avoid dogfish, fishermen had to move to deeper waters, yet Tolley said they were still pulling up 15,000 to 25,000 pounds of dogfish daily, most of which had to be discarded. In 2010 the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration’s Fisheries Service declared the stocks rebuilt, and catch limits were increased. Last year, another rules change related to fisheries observers also made it more profitable to target dogfish.

While the increase in dogfish stocks had its benefits – the fish are generally within 10 miles of shore – it also had its drawbacks, and not just the low per-pound price. Fishermen noticed early on that while the dogfish were coming back, the cod weren’t. Dogfish are predators, and many fishermen believe they’re a factor in the continued depletion of cod stocks.

“You can’t grow corn in a field of locust,” said Our.

Fishermen also see the growing population of gray seals as contributing to the problem. Between the two species, “they’re eating pretty much everything,” Tolley said.

“I haven’t fished since December,” Our added. “Seals fish every day.”

On March 23 the Hook Fishermen’s Association will host a symposium to explore the connection and interaction between the commercial fishing industry and the seals. It’s one of several complex issues that contribute to the state of the industry, Pappalardo said, including climate change and changes in tides and water temperature, all of which have longterm impacts on the ecosystem.

“It’s alarming” to see some of those changes modeled into the future, as he did on a recent trip to Washington, D.C., Pappalardo said. “All of these things are happening rapidly and in combinations that force changes. The real trick is figuring out where we’re going to end up in a few years and having the opportunity to position our community to benefit.

“I don’t know where this is going to lead,” he added, “but it’s important to have this discussion in the open.”

How to stabilize the commercial fishing fleet and rebuild stocks are tricky questions, Dempsey said. The regulatory frameworks try to balance those needs, but some question if continuing to allow any catch of cod is wise, as well as the wisdom of allowing 10 percent of last year’s unused allocation to carry over into 2013, as recently announced by NOAA Northeast Region Administrator John Bullard.

“I think that represents a true risk to a very vulnerable codfish stock on Georges Bank,” said Dempsey. While it may allow fishermen to bring in more cod, if they can find it, it puts the day that the stock is rebuilt “further out of reach,” he said.

While there is “plenty of evidence of the resiliency and ability of our fleet to diversify,” Pappalardo said, the regulatory walls that limit access to some fisheries pose a problem previous generations of fishermen didn’t have to deal with.

“Those types of regulatory decisions have consequences on small ports,” Dempsey noted.

For now, however, local fishermen will deal with the reality of what they are allowed to catch and what they can catch. Groups like the Hook Fishermen’s Association can help by exploring ways to market species like dogfish, monkfish and skate wings, most of which is currently shipped overseas (dogfish to England, where it is known as rock salmon and used in fish and chips, and to other European countries; skate wing goes mostly to France; and monkfish, also known as rape, is popular in Spain and other European countries). The group is more diversified now, Dempsey said, noting recent meetings held with fishermen to explore issues related not just to groundfish but to other species like lobster and shellfish.

Even though real Chatham cod has become a rarity, the commercial fleet still remains economically important to the town. The number of commercial boats working out of the pier has actually increased in recent years, due mostly to the proximity to the dogfish stocks as well as commercial bass. The number of docking permits at the fish pier is approaching the limit of 100, and town officials are wrestling with whether to increase the limit or implement a system of separate docking permits for boats targeting specific species.

To see the codfish, the namesake of the peninsula we live on, in such a state is “kind of tragic,” noted Smith. While dogfish, skate wing and monkfish are the species that will sustain Chatham’s fishing industry for now, it isn’t out of the realm of possibility that cod will rebound.

“The haddock fishery did, the striped bass fishery did,” Smith said. “But it’s going to be a painful process.”

See 10 years worth of fish pier landing reports on our website.

Chatham Fish Landings

**Species 2,003 2,012 Cod 2,348,673 514,406 Dogfish 414,589(2004) 3,395,068 Skate wing 1,936,745 1,805,250
Monkfish 861,263 246,205 Total landings for all species 7,473,057 6,321,535 Amounts in pounds. Source:
Chatham Harbormaster Department**