

by **Anna Child**

In his book entitled “Where the Water Smokes,” American writer Bob Simpson paints a literary picture of the Downeast coast of North Carolina, writing that it is a place that is akin to “a state of mind, where the people like wooden boats and build them in back yards, beneath big live oak trees...it is where you watch the sun rise boldly from the sea, feel sand between your toes, and inhale the pungencies of fish and brine, of marsh and pine”. He wrote that the people are those “hardworking people who make up the backbone of the land, independent, strong, and proud, the salt of the earth”.

This excerpt conveys the beauty and the culture of the area known as Downeast, North Carolina, historically referred to as the thirteen small communities in Carteret County in the Coastal Plain region of the state. The area has a strong connection to the sea – for nearly four hundred years, fishers have worked on the water, building boats and nets, and selling seafood along the coast. Many fishers today are able to trace their fishing heritage back four or five generations. As Simpson notes, Downeasters are hardworking people, especially the fishers, who still fish using artisanal techniques, such as pound netting for flounder in the fall or long

The successful Community Supported Fisheries project, implemented in Carolina, USA, offers the potential for the model to be applied in developing countries, if small-scale fishers can be linked to a high-income market that is willing to pay a premium price.

hauling for shrimp in the summer. Fishers still sew and mend their own nets, and embody the culture of Downeast with what is known as the High Tider accent, a dialect remnant of Elizabethan English that was once spoken in colonial North Carolina and now mixes with a general southern accent.

Decline of Downeast fishing

As an outsider, it is easy to get lost in the beauty of a place like this, its history and

culture so deeply steeped in the sea. For anyone that cares to get away from their beach vacation to look a bit deeper, however, it

becomes apparent that the Downeast culture, once so tied to commercial fishing, is facing tremendous challenges. Many Downeast fishers talk about themselves as a dying breed and one of the last in their families who will be fishing. Indeed, from 1999 to 2006, more than 50% of fishers have stopped working in the commercial sector, with significant declines in both total landings and dollar values of their catch.

This trend is relatively recent; up until the 1990s, it was possible for a fisher in Downeast to make a viable living and support a family solely from commercial fishing. Since then, however, a collection of events and conditions has made it extremely difficult for these fishers to sustain a livelihood. Today, the fishing community struggles to maintain a viable fishing industry and many are leaving



Anna Child

Community supported fisheries, an innovative model for developing countries



Sunset in Downeast.

their lives on the water and their communities to work elsewhere. A major cause of this decline was an influx of less expensive seafood from abroad. With 90% of shrimp found in the US today originating from overseas, wholesale shrimp prices in the state fell roughly 40% from 1999 to 2002, hitting North Carolina shrimpers particularly hard. Additionally, increased regulations on fishing techniques, amount, species and by-catch hurt the commercial industry in the state. Other factors such as increased population growth, development from the tourism industry, high fuel costs and runoff from the agricultural industry all led to increased challenges and the decline of the industry.

While facing these economic and environmental issues, market options for North Carolina fishers were impacted as well. Traditionally, almost all Downeast fishers sold to the fish house, which offered them ice, fuel, storage capabilities and most importantly, a place to sell their fish. In the 1980s, there were over twenty fish houses in the Downeast area. Currently, there are only four. With the fish houses rapidly disappearing, fishers struggled to find new markets for their catch and were losing crucial infrastructure, which required substantial capital to obtain on their own. Unfortunately, all of these issues impacting fishers are not specific to the state of North Carolina. Throughout the east coast of the US, particularly in the northeastern region, fishers



Map of North Carolina.

are facing these same challenges.

New market options – the CSF model

In order to remain viable in what many called a dying industry, fishers who wanted to stay fishing had to begin thinking of new market options. What new markets could they create for their seafood while obtaining the highest profit possible? Fortunately, fishers could learn much from small-scale farmers, who faced similar challenges related to rising fuel costs and cheap labour from abroad. Many of these farmers turned to local, direct sales, where they could cut out the middleman, obtain the highest profit, and differentiate their product by stressing the locality of where it was grown and its freshness. By selling directly, these small-scale farmers, many growing on less than 20 hectares, were able to

make a viable income. With its first origins in Japan, Germany and Switzerland, farmers began utilising a community-supported-agriculture (CSA) model, which essentially functions as a buy-in club. Consumers, or “shareholders,” pay the farmer for a share of the harvest in advance of the season. For the farmer, the payment covers seasonal start-up production costs. For the consumer, they receive a regular share of fresh produce during the production season. As interest in local food and sustainable agriculture soared in the US, the CSA model took off across the country. The model worked so well with agriculture that fishers decided to adopt the model for seafood, calling it a community-supported-fishery model or CSF.

The CSF model works in much the same way as CSA; the prepayment of the shareholder is an investment in “their” fishers. In exchange, a variety of fish species are provided on a seasonal basis and fishers are able to sell



The working waterfront on the Atlantic coast.



Pound netting flounder.

their products at a premium price. The first CSFs were established in the northeastern area of the US, in states such as Maine and Massachusetts. There are now a total of twenty in the country. CSFs are also found in places in France, Spain and Japan.

Core Sound Seafood is a community supported fishery business that works with fishers in the Downeast area of North Carolina that I helped to found. We established the business in March 2010, with the mission of paying Downeast fishers an average of 30% more than they could obtain from the fish house. We market ourselves as a socially and environmentally responsible business that provides high-quality, fresh, local fish. The drop off location for the seafood shares is four hours drive from the coast, where our formative research found a tremendous interest in fresh, local food and a willingness to pay for quality. The first season ran for twelve weeks in the summer of 2010 and there have been subsequent seasons in the fall of 2010 and spring of 2011. Currently, we are halfway through our fourth season. We offer a variety of frequency (every week or every other week) and size options (0.9 kg or 1.8 kg of filleted fish) as we have found that many consumers do not have the time to cook seafood every week. These choices also are reflected by a range of price options, which allows both students as well as more established professionals to join. We have worked with about twenty fishers so far, providing them with an additional market for their fish in which they can get premium prices.



Seafood being loaded onto a truck for delivery to customers.

Connecting communities

Perhaps one of the most exciting aspects of *Core Sound Seafood* and the general CSF model is the connection it can create between coastal and inland communities. This connection is often lost, with inland citizens only knowing the coast as a place for vacationing. In the Downeast area, many inlanders visit the area for the fresh fish, but are not aware of the significant challenges facing fishers. *Core Sound Seafood* and other CSFs provide information about these challenges, why it is important to buy from local fishers as well as details about what is in the share, who caught it and how, through a weekly email newsletter. The newsletter also teaches shareholders about fishing – the seasonality of fish, how the weather impacts fishing, etc. Shareholders enjoy reading about the coast, how the fish has come to be on their plate and become more invested in purchasing from the fishers that live in their state.

Additionally, the CSF shares offer a wide variety of fish, many of which are unavailable in mainstream grocery stores. With *Core Sound Seafood*, we offer species such as red drum, triggerfish, sheephead, croaker, and others that are underutilised and

delicious. This serves to expand the shareholder's repertoire as to which kinds of fish they like and by increasing people's knowledge about these alternatives, market pressure can be taken off some of the more exploited species such as tuna or grouper. *Core Sound Seafood* also provides suggested recipes for how to cook these types of fish as many people are unaware of what to do with them.

Now in its fourth season, *Core Sound Seafood* has experienced significant success on the consumer end. We have been able to pay fishers 30-50% more than the fish house pays and have served as a guaranteed market for a portion of fishers' catch before they catch it. We have also established a Downeast Assistance Fund in which we donate part of our profits to and invest this money back into the community by providing micro-grants for fishers to buy needed fishing and storage supplies. We have grown from one drop-off location to three and currently have over 200 shareholders. Shareholders enjoy learning about new fish species, seasonality in seafood and are proud to support the local seafood sector. We are also selling to grocery stores where we differentiate our products through informational signs that explain our seafood is a local, high-quality product only purchased from small-scale fishers in North Carolina. Our *Core Sound Seafood* logo helps consumers recognise the product. Additionally, we have begun to sell our products



Core Sound Seafood's display at the local supermarket.

to restaurants and ask that they include that the product is coming from *Core Sound Seafood* on their menus. A few restaurants have held local, *Core Sound Seafood* dinners and have advertised the event in newspapers and throughout the community.

As with any new business, these have also been challenges. It has been difficult to buy from the same fishers consistently as many have long working relationships with the fish houses and are wary of a new model, which may seem risky. It has also been challenging to work with some of the consumer perceptions about what kind of seafood is sustainable, which often depends on the type of gear used to catch it, though sustainable seafood guides do not differentiate based on gear. Additionally, offering enough variety in weekly shares has proven difficult, as shareholders want to get different kinds of seafood each week.

Potential application in developing countries

Although the community-supported fishery model is certainly not without challenges, it is an innovative model that is now occurring across the US and abroad as a way to improve fishers' access to higher value markets. It is also teaching fishers how to market themselves and their product. There is potential for the model to be applied in the developing country setting, if small-scale fishers could be linked to a high-income market that will be willing to pay a premium price. In the developing country setting however, it is crucial for there to be a strong capacity building piece to help fishers meet certification and traceability standards.

As autumn sets in Downeast, fishers are deep in flounder and oyster season. The other day, a fisherman talked about the backbreaking work of setting 1 000 wooden stakes by himself to set his flounder nets. Another lamented a week closing of the oyster beds due to heavy rains. This is the hard work and challenges fishers in this area have been experiencing and talking about for hundreds of years, but to me, it is good news that they are still talking about it. It means these fishers still have a market for their catch and are thus still fishing. With the community-supported-fishery model, we hope to continue to be able to support them. ☺

Anna Child is co-founder and co-owner of *Core Sound Seafood*, a CSF business. She is finishing her Masters Degree in Public Health at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill and is part-time consultant for FAO on issues related to the small-scale sector.

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