

# Fished Out

Depleted Stocks And Ever-Tighter Rules Threaten The Future Of New England's Fishing Industry.

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**STONINGTON** -- Russ Bowles cast off on his final voyage as a commercial fisherman in the midnight chill of late October.

As mate on the 55-foot trawler *Serena*, he spent the night filling reeking bait barrels with "trash fish," in the frigid winds and inky darkness of Block Island Sound. For Bowles, the beauty and freedom of working on the water outweighed the danger and discomfort that comes with harvesting a living from the sea.

It was the inability to make a living, not the fear of losing his life, that drove him from the fishing business. Bowles' future on the sea was dried up by the very regulations intended to preserve the industry -- limits on the amount of fish the *Serena* can bring ashore, a limit on the days fishermen can work at sea, restrictions on the size of the fish they catch and the size of the mesh in their nets. Worst of all, he says, the permit system that prevents him from running his own boat has kept him from making enough money to buy a house, raise a family, and build a life.

Since the time of Christ, the ocean was believed to have the capacity to feed the world. Nowhere has that belief been refuted as convincingly as 1990s New England. Today the list of threatened species reads like a fishmonger's chalkboard.

Biologists see the failure of Bowles' fishing career as a success. They point to overcapitalization -- too many boats and too many fishermen -- as the greatest threat to the world's marine resources. For fish to survive, they believe thousands of fishermen must leave the trade.

Earrings, a shaved head and combat boots make Bowles, 30, a distinctive figure amid the stacks of lobster pots and trawl nets on the Stonington docks -- a punk-rock symbol of the next generation of New England fishermen. His departure underscores that it is fast becoming a lost generation.

"I'd love to do this the rest of my life," Bowles laments after recalling the first time he saw the sun rise from the ocean while he set the *Serena's* nets. "But there's no way I can ever own a boat. The permits are all taken. There's a moratorium on new permits. These guys are getting older. Young people can't get into it."

Al Maderia, the owner and captain of the *Serena*, says Bowles was just what the industry needs -- a guy who shows up on time and brings a college degree with him. He expects a long search to replace the University of Hartford graduate.

"At some point we're going to run out of fishermen," Maderia, 46, says.

Scientists say that may be the only alternative to running out of fish.

Today more fishing boats prowl the world's oceans than at any time in history. Their catch, however, has declined each year of the last decade. By the end of the next decade, the United Nations warns, there may no longer be enough fish in the sea to satisfy the world's appetite for them.

On the late October day that Bowles hauled his last bag of skates aboard the *Serena*, the National Academy of Sciences reported that 80 percent of the commercially popular fish species in U.S. fishing grounds, and more than a third worldwide, are fully exploited or overfished. In other words, they are being caught faster than they can reproduce. That same day the United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organization convened a conference in Rome where nearly 100 countries, including the United States, agreed to further, drastic cuts to the world's catch.

Georges Bank, 100 miles southeast of Cape Cod and for 500 years the world's richest fishing ground, was closed to almost all fishing when its stocks of cod and haddock collapsed in the early 1990s, costing New England \$350 million a year and 14,000 jobs.

In the past 20 years, the average size of swordfish caught in the North Atlantic has dropped by nearly two-thirds -- from 265 pounds to 90 pounds. Most swordfish killed today have not had a chance to breed.

The North Atlantic population of bluefin tuna, a fish that has sold for as much as \$80,000, making it the world's most valuable wild animal, has declined by more than 85 percent since the 1970s.

Researchers at the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institute on Cape Cod report that 98 percent of the lobsters landed in Long Island Sound have just reached the legal minimum size, which is 3 1/4 inches from the eye socket to the base of the tail.

Southern New England stocks of winter flounder, yellowtail flounder and fluke fell to an all-time low in the early 1990s, according to assessments by the National Marine Fisheries Service.

When fishers were restricted from pursuing lucrative groundfish like cod, haddock, fluke and flounder, they were encouraged to focus on "underutilized" fish like monkfish and dogfish. Groundfish are species that live near the ocean floor.

"I remember when you landed monkfish and a guy would take them home and use them for dogfood," Maderia says. "Julia Child got on TV and told people how good these monkfish were, and that's all it took. Now you can't get more than one or two a pull."

By 1996, the National Marine Fisheries Service was forced to cut the permitted catch of monkfish by more than half.

The story of the spiny dogfish is even more dramatic.

The small sharks, which often filled nets set out to catch cod and flounder, were once hated by fishermen. But, when the more-valuable species dwindled, many fishing boats struggling to stay in business set their nets for "dogs," which are popular in Europe for fish and chips.

The catch of dogfish jumped from 10 million pounds in 1989, to 33 million pounds in 1990. By 1997, when the fisheries service declared the species -- and many other sharks -- overfished, the catch was 45 million pounds. The shark's slow reproduction rate compounded the problem, forcing the service to cut the catch of dogfish by nearly 95 percent. In 2000, the quota for dogfish will be set at 3 million pounds, a level that will remain fixed for nine years.

As the fish species with commercial value have been depleted and then subject to protective limits, New England fishermen have found themselves scraping the bottom of the barrel. In the case of Maderia and Bowles, that is dragging lobster bait from the bottom of Block Island Sound in the middle of the night. Last summer, when Connecticut had not yet reached its annual limit of fluke landings, the *Serena* was still fishing days and the life of a fisherman seemed just a bit brighter.

When the fishing was good, Rob Berg, 65, joined Maderia and Bowles to provide a third pair of hands when the nets came up. When the nets were down, the trio gabbed in the wheelhouse of Maderia's boat -- symbols of the present, past and future of Connecticut's fishing industry.

Even the name of Berg's old boat, the "Old Mystic," hints at Connecticut's fishing heyday. His father built the wooden boat in 1946 and Berg made his living on it for 45 years.

He tells Maderia and Bowles about filling the holds of his boat so early in the day in the 1970s that he had the afternoon to hunt swordfish for fun.

"You could harpoon them while they were sunning after they ate," he says. "Now you can't find a swordfish. First was longlining. Then they started spotting them from planes. If they keep pulling up 45-pound swords, we won't have any more big ones."

Bowles mentions that he has never seen a swordfish in the water.

When Berg was fishing, the business was largely unregulated, and ocean fisheries were open to anybody. Boats from Connecticut competed with the huge factory ships from the former Soviet Union, Spain, and Japan.

"Back in 1974, we'd go out by Block Island and the whole horizon would be lit up [by factory ships]," Berg recalls. "Everybody blames the Russians. They just did what we were going to do. They just got to it 10-15 years earlier."

When, with the 1977 Magnuson Act, the United States took control of the marine resources within 200 miles of the coast, the foreign boats were driven out. Biologists, regulators and fishermen hoped that would allow the badly depleted stocks of cod, haddock, and yellowtail flounder to recover. As Berg points out, however, New England fishermen quickly filled the void. By 1980, the New England fishing fleet had expanded by 42 percent. Its prey continued to dwindle.

Stonington fishermen have once again found themselves competing with big boats, as the closure of the Northeast's most significant fisheries -- Georges Bank and the Grand Banks -- has forced more fishermen into the waters of Rhode Island, Connecticut and New York.

Berg sold his boat in 1990. A year later he retired from fishing and took a job as a security guard at Foxwoods Casino.

It takes two hours to fill the *Serena*'s net and 15 minutes for the boat's winches to pull it back on board. When it arrives, Bowles dumps the bulging net -- a bag of groceries from the sea floor -- onto the deck, leaving a knee-deep pile of fluke, flounder, skates, monkfish, dogfish, lobster, whiting, squid, crabs, and a single black sea bass. While Berg pilots the boat, Maderia and Bowles drop the net back into the water. The three men then begin snagging the fish with picks -- wooden sticks topped with spikes -- and sorting them into plastic baskets. Fish that are too small are thrown overboard. It takes an hour to sort and store the catch. When they are done, Bowles pushes a pile of unwanted, and illegal fish -- bycatch, much of it dead -- back into the water.

By the time the *Serena* makes its fourth and final "pull," the boat has already reached its quota of fluke for the day. The fluke in the fourth pull join the bycatch and are thrown back into the water. Maderia guesses that 40 percent of them are dead.

"If you could have seen the fluke we saw four and six weeks ago," Maderia says. "We were throwing 300 pounds a night of fluke overboard. We were at a 50-pound quota and I was throwing more money away in fluke than I was catching in lobster bait. If they keep the quota the same, we'll just be throwing back more dead ones."

In the years since Berg retired from fishing, Maderia and the rest of the Stonington fleet have been rocked by waves of restrictions and regulations. The bycatch is just one of the side effects.

Maderia isn't happy about being told what fish he can catch and when he can catch them, after fishing freely for years. He admits that fishery resources have been in desperate need of conservation and management, but says the oversight of the New England Fisheries Management Council has been poor. Environmentalists and fishermen alike complain that regulation has been burdensome, complicated, ineffective and difficult to enforce.

"As soon as you get the laws all straight in your head, they come out with new ones," Maderia says.

Today, the New England Groundfish Recovery Plan allows Maderia only 88 days at sea to catch groundfish. The amount of each species of fish that he is allowed to land is changed regularly, sometimes as often as every week, as regulators seek to make the annual quota last the year.

While regulations controlling the type, size and amount of fish a boat can pursue have limited New England fishermen's income, regulations controlling the type of gear they use can impose costly, unexpected expenses. For example, the minimum mesh size in a trawler's nets has been increased twice in past five years, forcing fishermen to replace nets that cost thousands of dollars each. Another increase is being considered.

In October, a few days before Russ Bowles gave up the fishing business, the management council announced it will raise the minimum size of winter flounder landed in New England to 13 inches next spring.

"That will be the last nail in the coffin for a lot of guys," says Maderia, pointing out that the fish has always been smaller in Southern New England waters. "That will devastate us."

As the *Serena* heads in, her three-man crew looks to the Stonington waterfront, where the future of Connecticut's fishing industry used to wait on the docks for the boats to return from the sea. Today there are no children waiting on the docks for their fathers.

"Those days are gone," Maderia says. "My son couldn't care less about fishing. There's no future in it."