

EINAR HANSEN

EMPTY NETS

by Mrill Ingram

Whether your last seafood meal was blackened redfish at a posh Cajun restaurant, raw tuna at a sushi bar, or a fish sandwich at McDonalds, chances are it was recent. Driven by promises that eating seafood will put heart doctors out of business, Americans are eating more fish than ever. According to the Marine Fisheries Institute in Washington we ate five hundred and forty-nine million pounds more seafood in 1985 than in 1980, in spite of dramatically increased prices. Fresh tuna that would not have sold for a dollar a pound in 1972 today sells at an average of seven dollars a pound. Consumers now pay at least two more dollars a pound for fresh cod, a staple white fish, than they do for ground beef.

Prices are rising because fish are scarce, and fishermen must work harder and harder to fill their boats. As Americans have begun to turn from beef to fish for their protein, the demand is putting enormous pressure on an already seriously depleted resource. The bountiful ocean, once looked to as the solution to world hunger, is proving exhaustible. Modern technology has promoted vacuum-cleaner methods of harvesting the ocean's riches; ignorance and politics have confounded the search for solutions.

The New England fisheries are some of the hardest hit. According to the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) in Woods Hole, Massachusetts, while efforts by New England fishermen to land the Atlantic cod increased, their 1985 catch was 96.8 million pounds, the lowest since 1979. Harvests of haddock on Georges Bank have plummeted from some sixty million pounds in 1980 to only twenty-two million pounds in 1985. In 1983 New England fishermen brought in over sixty-five million pounds of yellowtail flounder; the 1985 catch was about half that. New Bedford is still the country's top-dollar port: 1986's harvest of 90.6 million pounds of seafood was worth 103.2 million dollars dockside. But the 1985 "Assessment at Mid-Decade" from the Massachusetts Division of Marine Fisheries reported that "high-value, desirable species have been fished down to low levels of abundance, and there are no foreseeable prospects for improvement." Rip Cunningham, editor in chief of "Salt Water Sportsman," says of New England's offshore fisheries: "We are seeing the systematic destruction of one of the greatest fisheries on earth."

A dramatic example of how public demand affects fish stocks is the redfish in the Gulf of Mexico. As Cajun cooking recently swept the

country, fishermen rushed to meet the demand for the redfish, or drum, which is native to the Gulf. Harvests rose from two hundred thousand pounds in 1983 to 5.3 million pounds in the first five months of 1986. The seiners were cleaning out the Gulf of Mexico so well that the NMFS, under pressure from recreational fishermen and conservation groups, declared a moratorium on redfish and has proposed a ban on harvests until 1988. (Many restaurants are using black drum, a close culinary relative of the redfish, to prepare the trendy dish.)

The heart of our overfishing problem lies in the primitive yet widespread attitude that the ocean's resources are boundless. "We are still hunters and gatherers on the ocean," says Kenneth Beal of the NMFS. The conservation ethic has not yet been applied to the seas. Traditionally, fishermen have hunted open seas that belonged to everyone and were regulated by no one. And thus many of the great fish species of the ocean are being decimated, just as the bison of the American West were wiped out one hundred years ago. Now we have reached the point where these species must be managed as a limited resource if they are not to disappear.

Overfishing was not a serious problem when fishermen used small boats in local operations. But technology has changed the industry. "With all the electronics, fishing is not so much a hunt as a mining operation," says Guy Marchesseault, deputy executive director of the New England Fishery Management Council. Electronic devices now process sonar echoes into color images on a video monitor so fishermen can detect schools of


fish and even differentiate between species. If looking under the boat doesn't work, hunters can turn to the air. Spotter planes helped fishermen in the Gulf of Mexico detect the schooling redfish, which reflect as dark bronze spots in the water.

High-tech fishing came into its own after the 1976 Magnuson Fishery Conservation and Management Act extended U.S. offshore jurisdiction to two hundred miles. Aided by tax incentives from the government, U.S. fishermen celebrated the departure of the monstrous Russian, Japanese and German trawlers that had been taking nearly seventy-six percent of the catch by pouring vast amounts of money into new boats and technology. Vessel construction jumped seventy percent in 1977. Wooden boats were scrapped for steel-hulled trawlers. The technology that made the foreign ships so successful was miniaturized and mass-produced. In his book "Distant Waters," William Warner describes the foreign fleets' catching power that U.S. fishermen have been so anxious to match: "First, assume a vast continental forest. Then try to imagine a mobile and completely self-contained timber-cutting machine that could smash through the forest, cut down trees, mill them, and deliver consumer-ready lumber in half the time of normal logging and milling operations."

Unfortunately our new efficiency has not been matched by deeper insight into the ocean's ecology, partly because of a lack of research. Studying what goes on under the ocean's surface is much more difficult than walking into a forest and counting trees. Running a submersible vessel to view undersea life costs ten thousand dollars per day. And without information about the numbers, migration patterns and species interactions of fish, effective management is difficult. Richard Langton, a scientist at the Maine Department of Marine Resources, points out that people are only just beginning to make ecological connections in the oceans. "Only recently has fishing been on a large enough scale to see global changes. We've started to realize that resources aren't infinite. There now needs to be more research into production; only fish can make fish."

An example of how ignorance, fueled by technology, creates disaster is the Peruvian anchovy fishery, once the world's largest. Fifteen hundred vessels hauled in fourteen million tons of the fish in 1970. In 1972 El Nino brought warm currents that pushed out the nutrient-rich colder waters and effectively herded anchovies toward the coast, where a band of cooler water remained. The fishing fleet closed in for an easy kill, taking as much as one hundred and eighty thousand tons in a day. Soon there were no more fish. Unfortunately, the anchovies were the primary food for guany

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