

The Fisherman

70TH ANNIVERSARY 1937-2007

VOL. 72 NO. 1

AUGUST, 2007

VANCOUVER, B.C.

\$1

THE FISHERMAN, AUGUST 2007

10

FISHERIES

Are our B.C. fisheries sustainable?

Some technologies may have no place in future harvesting

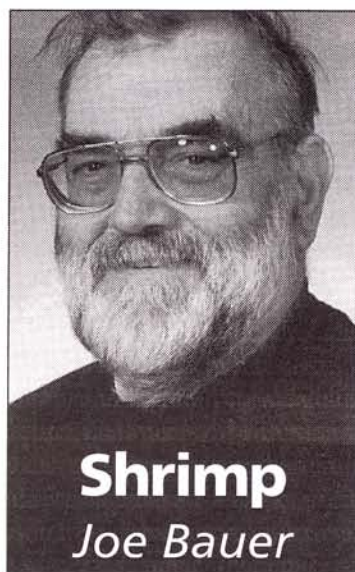
Fisheries have been a life-long occupation and interest of mine. So I try to keep up with what's going on with government policies on resource management and how they affect us as fishermen.

I've just read through the final report of the Special Legislative Committee on Aquaculture and the proposed new Fisheries Act, Bill C-45, which was introduced into Parliament last December. I've also looked over a number of other recent publications on conservation issues as well as climate change, which is an issue that will inevitably have an effect on our resources.

One word keeps on popping up: "sustainable." Any English dictionary will give you a definition for common usage of the word. But in conservation biology, sustainable development means ensuring that the rate of exploitation of natural resources doesn't exceed the rate of renewal for those resources. In fisheries, that means not exploiting — or degrading — the biomass to the point of non-recovery.

If we continue to exploit resources and destroy habitat the way we've been doing, how can it be sustainable?

The large-scale fisheries, such as factory bottom trawlers, are



indiscriminate in their harvesting, taking everything in their path, including usable target species and non-targeted unusable bycatch. Their method of catch also causes heavy habitat damage. Semi-pelagic and pelagic (midwater) trawls do much less damage, at least to habitat.

I recently attended a couple of presentations in Vancouver on the work being done by Dr. Manfred Krautter of the Institute for Geology and Paleontology at the University of Stuttgart in Germany. He points out that modern glass sponge reefs exist

today only on the continental shelf off the B.C. coast. Juvenile rockfish species use these reefs as deep sea habitat nurseries and 10 times more fish are found in these reefs than in the surrounding sea bottom area. In the cold water corals, many species have been lost even before they've been identified. We'll never really know the extent of our losses.

Dr. Krautter showed undersea video footage of areas on the Maerl beds in Scotland and the glass sponge reefs in B.C. of the devastation in trawled areas, compared to untrawled beds and reefs. He had some very interesting footage of glass sponge reefs in B.C. that had been filmed a year or two before, and then again after the bottom trawls had passed over them. The earlier footage showed a vibrant community, filled with marine life, the later footage a flattened, lifeless moonscape.

Dr. Krautter considers bottom trawling currently as the greatest threat to marine habitat in B.C. Together with other fisheries, they have already destroyed 50 per cent of the glass sponge reefs.

We've seen what the uncontrolled deep-sea fisheries that target large predatory species, such as swordfish, marlin and bluefin tuna, have done to the stocks. We've slowed down their harvest rate and catch, only to start fishing down the food chain on the very species that would allow them to recover. How sustainable is that practice?

At the same time, the commendable work that has been done by the shrimp trawl fleet to

reduce not only unwanted bycatch, but also to become more species and size selective, points to our ability to develop sustainable yield technologies. This month, the Oregon shrimp fleet may become the first shrimp fishery to be certified as a sustainable fishery by the Marine Stewardship Council. Canada is thought to be about a year behind but on track. British Columbia's shrimp fishery is known as one of the cleanest in the world and efforts are underway to make it the cleanest of all.

Smaller-scale fisheries, including gillnetting, trolling, longlining, handlining, seining, trap fishing and small trawls — both beam and otter — that target specific species and fish selectively are, on the whole, easier to manage for sustainability. They can be much kinder to the environment and fish habitat.

Managing fisheries for sustainability is the way to go, but too often in the past, fishing technologies were allowed to continue, even after they were shown to be non-selective or even destructive. Around the world, some management systems, including quota management, have encouraged non-sustainable fisheries. In the future, sustainable fisheries will have to take into account the protection of whole ecosystems and will have to involve fishermen in developing new selective fishing methods and moving away from destructive gear. The world's biotic systems can't accommodate the rise in human density unless we all pitch in on sustainable resource management.