



Ted Creaser, ARC Centre of Excellence for Coral Reef Studies

The sea urchin fishery in Maine resulted in one of the largest ecosystem-scale changes in a coastal zone attributable to a single fishery.

FINDINGS

The historians argue that the triggering event for the development of American fisheries management was Japan's interest in fishing for sockeye salmon in Bristol Bay, Alaska—in 1936 the world's most lucrative fishery. To protect domestic fishing interests, then Secretary of State Cordell Hull said that American fishermen were limiting their harvests to conserve fish. The Japanese would muck this up if they started fishing the region. What he failed to acknowledge was that there was already scientific evidence for overfishing of Bristol Bay runs—that is, American fishermen were not conserving stocks, but conservation was being trotted out as a rationalization for policy.

Another pivotal event occurred in 1945, when President Truman formally

declared America's right to create conservation zones off its coast to protect fish. None were created. Latin America, however, jumped on the Truman Proclamation to justify excluding foreign boats (particularly tuna boats) off its coast. Things were already becoming messy.

“We were concerned that restricting fishing boats in Latin America could be used as a precedent to restrict nonfishing boats off other coasts,” said Sea Grant Trainee Carmel Finley. America wanted to be able to maintain its presence, be it with Navy boats or fishing boats, anywhere in the world. To this end, Wilbert McLeod Chapman, the first fisheries attaché at the State Department, adopted the U.S. High Seas Fishery Policy (1949). The policy championed the idea of deriving “the maximum production of food from the sea on a sustained basis year after year,” without citing any supporting scientific papers or references. The concept of MSY had been born.

In ensuing years, the United States pushed for an international MSY treaty, eventually adopted in 1955 in Rome. Under the treaty, foreign boats had the right to fish off any coast. Nations that wanted to exclude foreign boats had to first prove its fish were over exploited.

The recommendations from the Rome conference were forwarded to the International Law Commission in Geneva in 1956. Over the next few years, MSY would be adopted as a legal construction as well.

SUMMARY

The take-home message from this study, as stated in the final report to California Sea Grant, is that “science has had little direct influence on the development of American fisheries policy.” Furthermore, contrary to common opinion, the United States has played a decisive, if not dominant, role in shaping international fisheries management processes in place today. In particular, at key moments in history, it promoted the principle of Maximum Sustainable Yield (MSY) as the basis for first domestic and then international fisheries management policy to further its foreign policy objectives and Cold War territorial claims, not because the science was there to substantiate it.

The objective of this study has been to document the historical development of U.S. fisheries policy, in the hopes of understanding why fisheries management has, in many cases, failed to protect fish stocks, fishing jobs and fishing communities.

METHOD

Unlike most California Sea Grant research, this was a history project, based on reading and analyzing documents at the U.N.'s Food and Agriculture Organization in Rome and the National Archives and Records Administration in College Park, Md., at which U.S. State Department and U.S. Fish and Wildlife files are kept. Archival research was also conducted at the Truman and Eisenhower presidential libraries, among other places.

“The practical effect of MSY was that wealthy nations were able to fish unhindered off the coasts of poorer nations, taking as much fish as possible, until these countries began expanding their Exclusive Economic Zones during the 1970s,” Finley said.

CONCLUSIONS

MSY is a theoretical construction that continues to exist in political, scientific and legal realms. Though it derives its power from its supposed scientific underpinning, there is no scientific basis for MSY.

PUBLICATIONS

2007. “The Political History of Maximum Sustained Yield, 1945-1955.” *Oceans Past: Management Insights from the History of Marine Animal Populations*. Edited by David J. Starkey, Poul Holm and Michaela Barnard. (London: Earthscan, 2007). 189–206.

2008. “The Social Construction of Fishing, 1949.” *Ecology and Society*. In press as part of a special edition devoted to the issue of resilience in fish stocks.

PRESENTATIONS

2007. 11th Annual North Atlantic Fisheries History Conference, Bergen, Norway. “Fisheries Science and American Foreign Policy, 1945-1955.”

2007. Pathways to Resilience, Oregon Sea Grant, Portland, Ore. “The Social Construction of Fishing, 1949.”

2007. American Society for Environmental History, Annual Meeting, Baton Rouge, La. “The Social Construction of Fishing, 1949.”

COLLABORATORS

Truman Presidential Library
U.N.’s Food and Agriculture Organization
Eisenhower Presidential Library
UC San Diego’s social sciences, history and science studies programs

STUDENT

Carmel Finley, Ph.D., 2007, UC San Diego, “The Tragedy of Enclosure: Fish, Fisheries Science and U.S. Foreign Policy, 1920–1960.”

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More than 50 Taiwanese longline vessels were based in Koror, Palau and licensed to fish in the Palau Exclusive Economic Zone in August, 2007.



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