

FISHERMEN'S NEWS

The Advocate for the Commercial Fisherman



Pacific Coast Federation of Fishermen's Associations

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The following article originally ran in Fishermen's News in May, 1996. Although 20 years old this month, the topic is still relevant to today's commercial fishing industry and its many continuing struggles to exist. We reprint it here in honor of the work of Nat Bingham, PCFFA's longest serving past President, and Zeke Grader, the recently deceased Executive Director of PCFFA, who both lived by this credo and who guided our West Coast fishing industry by its principles through decades of service. Their legacy and inspiration lives on.

– Tim Sloane, PCFFA Executive Director and Glen Spain, PCFFA NW Regional Director.

The Fishermen's Manifesto

GLEN SPAIN AND ZEKE GRADER, PACIFIC COAST FEDERATION OF FISHERMEN'S ASSOCIATIONS

Commercial fishing builds in a strong ethic of stewardship and respect for Nature. Fishing brings you face to face with Nature at both her wildest and her most nurturing. Yet fishermen cannot put the environment passively on a pedestal – instead, like small family farmers, they must actively engage Nature, seek to adapt to her natural rhythms where they can and take part in her bounty where she allows – but always on her terms. Fishermen seldom forget, however, that they are part of and dealing with a wild and enormously powerful natural system in which we humans play only a very small part. Both fish and human needs must be met by Nature if we are to survive. All of us are Nature's children, and owe her for our lives.

Like all the rest of humankind, however, we are also coping with and learning to control our own developing powers to bend these natural rhythms beyond their breaking point. Nature is forgiving only up to that point.

Going beyond it unleashes terrible consequences we as a species are only dimly beginning to understand. All too often we wield our powers without knowing the consequent environmental destruction or genetic catastrophe we may unleash. We are now capable of destroying not only ourselves but Nature's other creatures as well. We even have the power to do so by accident or from neglect.

The world's oceans and all their bounty are a public resource. Commercial fishermen are allowed to use that resource only at the sufferance of the public, and we are responsible to the public at large for our actions. Fishermen are merely stewards and must discharge their public trust responsibly. Whether we are good stewards or bad stewards will determine whether the public retains its confidence in us to discharge that public trust wisely.

Today these public resources themselves face a multitude of assaults. Fishing as a way of life is threatened not only by world market forces but also by a multitude of cumulative habitat losses which when all combined now face both fishermen and the majority of fish species

on this planet with the serious prospect of extinction. Fragile ocean ecosystems suffer from widespread pollution and too many streams and estuaries have been biologically depleted. Global warming now threatens the delicate balance of ocean life, while sea level rises are beginning to threaten ports and coastal communities. Continued thinning of the earth's ozone layer may result in too much UV radiation killing off much of the ocean's zooplankton, thus knocking out the very foundation of the ocean's food chain as well as the primary source of atmospheric oxygen. Scientists now know that all these threats are very real. Fishermen must speak out against all these things and help reverse them before it is too late. Fortunately they are reversible – all of them are caused by human activities, which can be changed.

To our own shame we have also allowed far too many fish species to be overexploited. Bycatch and waste is much higher in many fisheries than it needs to be or should be. Lack of international controls and increasingly powerful fishing technologies make the risk of overexploitation an omnipresent threat in many areas of the world. The public is closely watching and seriously questioning our willingness and ability to solve these problems ourselves.

We must demand solutions to these problems, and we must hold ourselves to a very high standard or we will lose the public's confidence and support. The increasing technological power to fish



must also be coupled with increasing self-restraint and greater responsibility.

Human beings now can – and indeed now are – changing the planet far faster than any geological force, but without any guidance whatsoever and with almost no forethought as to the ultimate consequences. Like the demigods and heroes of ancient Greek mythology, we are afflicted with our own hubris – the belief that we can do Nature’s job better than she can. This is pure arrogance of the sort that usually leads to tragedy.

We can do much better. Fortunately our industry has generally been unified around the basic principles of conservation and stewardship. Also, in spite of industry fragmentation and constant infighting over allocations, when faced with serious outside threats we usually do manage to come together and present a united front. This is such a time. Today the world’s oceans face a multitude of environmental threats far more serious than any they have faced throughout geological time. We must now not only continue to earn the right to exist as an industry, but also aggressively defend the right of the resource itself to continue to exist at all! There is no doubt in our minds that those of us who make our living from the sea must be its principal champions and defenders. If we do not speak for the fish – who will?

To that end, we offer the following six principles as guidelines for the protection not only of our industry, but for the preservation of the fragile and irreplaceable resource upon which it is based and with which we are entrusted. By following these principles, our industry will assure both the continued existence of this resource, and of the public’s trust in our stewardship. As recent years have clearly shown, neither our continued existence as a way of life nor the public’s trust in our stewardship are a given – they must continually be earned.

THE FISHERMEN’S MANIFESTO

1. Sustainability: The commercial fishing industry will work to assure that all fisheries are primarily managed and regulated on the basis of biologically sound and sustainable harvest levels. This means assuring that there are adequate scientific research, resource assessment, and enforcement programs in addition to scientifically sound fishing regulations to assure long-term sustained yields within the ultimate constraints of biological sustainability. Our most fundamental duty is to pass on this biological heritage intact to future generations.

2. Habitat Protection: The commercial fishing industry will actively and aggressively take all actions necessary, including the promotion of regulations or litigation, to assure the full protection of the biological habitats and ecosystems necessary to maintain and maximize the production and health of fish and shellfish populations. The loss of fish habitat results in an economic loss to fishermen and seafood processors as certain as any theft of catch or shutdown. Industry will seek cooperation and alliances with conservation organizations and/or governmental fishery organizations in pursuing the cause of fish habitat protection, but will, when necessary, initiate and lead actions in its own right to assure that fish habitat is protected and restored.

3. Selective Fishing: The commercial fishing industry will identify and initiate those actions necessary to avoid wherever possible the bycatch of marine mammals, turtles, seabirds and non-target fish species, regardless of whether such takes are “biologically sustainable.” The principle must be: “If you can’t use it or sell it, don’t take it.” The fishing industry is licensed by the public to provide the public with access to its public resources in the market place; this is not a license to take or kill other public trust resources for which there is no lawful market. An active program, therefore, must be established (for those fisheries where bycatch is a problem) for the modification of existing fishing gear or the adoption of new fishing gear or other techniques to avoid and minimize bycatch. The program should encourage fishermen to identify problems and provide them with the necessary technical and monetary assistance to enable them to effectively minimize bycatch and work toward an ultimate goal of total bycatch elimination.

4. Maximize the Value of Fish Taken: The commercial fishing industry shall endeavor to maximize the value of fish taken, utilizing as much of the fish as possible and changing currently wasteful fishery practices where they exist (such as the shark fin fishery) to assure maximum utilization of this resource. The license to fish is not a license to waste.

5. Provide the Best Possible Product: The commercial fishing industry – in all of its harvesting, processing and distribution sectors – shall always endeavor to provide the public with a safe, healthful and, wherever possible, affordable source of food protein. The public grant of a license to fish carries with it a responsibility to return to the public the best possible and most desirable product.

6. Act As Stewards of the Public Interest: As commercial fishermen, processors and users of the public’s resource, we are stewards of the resource. We will therefore combine together within our own industry to responsibly discharge that trust, join with others to protect and restore the resource, and work cooperatively with recreational fishermen and public interest groups wherever possible to conserve this resource for future generations. The fishing industry will also strive for international fishing and conservation standards which are scientifically sound, universally applied, and both fair and equitable, and which will assure the highest level of international cooperation and conservation feasible. In all our work, long-term sustainable use and conservation must be our most fundamental principle and highest goal.

These principles have been of enormous guidance to our organization as we have fought the battles we still fight to protect the resource and to help fishing communities prosper, and will doubtless serve us well in the future. We now offer them to you, our friends and allies within our industry, for your consideration.

As fishing communities move quickly into the 21st century, change is all around us. Change is scary, but it also presents new opportunities for the taking. The future is never fixed, but tomorrow is largely determined by our own actions



(or inactions) on a daily basis today. We all hope for a better world, but hope alone is never enough. We must also organize to work together to create that better world for those who come after us, just as our own ancestors did for us. We must always work to assure our own survival and prosperity – it will not be handed to us.

There is a biblical saying: “What does it profit a man to gain the whole world while losing his own soul.” Fishing families and fishing communities are the heart and lifeblood of our industry and what makes it great. The guiding philosophies which determine the soul of our industry, however – whether pure profit or responsible stewardship – are still very much in doubt. It is our hope that the guiding principles set forth here, if applied, will help us all to regain, nourish and revitalize the

soul of this industry that we all love, and help us all in our transition into the new century. **FN**

The Pacific Coast Federation of Fishermen's Associations (PCFFA) is the largest organization of commercial fishing families on the US West Coast, and a federation of many different local port associations and fishing boat owners associations. PCFFA's Southwest Regional Office can be reached at: PO Box 29370, San Francisco, CA 94129-0370, (415)561-5080. PCFFA's Northwest Regional Office can be reached at: PO Box 11170, Eugene, OR 97440-3370, (541)689-2000. PCFFA's Internet Home Page is at: www.pcffa.org. PCFFA's Executive Director Tim Sloane can be reached via email at: tsloane@ififish.org.