“To get along, go along” doesn’t get it. It may seem that the latent curmudgeon in us is at last coming out of the closet, but there are some issues we have that need voicing.

Each of us in this industry – that is, the part made up of or representing the small to mid-size fishing vessel owner/operator “family fishermen” segment – has a special responsibility. It goes beyond conducting sustainable fishing operations, striving to bring the highest quality product possible to market, maintaining safe operations, and protecting the environment that sustains our livelihoods. That responsibility also extends to guarding our access and that of future generations to our resources of fish and shellfish, and safeguarding the rich tradition and culture of one of humankind’s oldest and proudest trades.

So if we sound again like old curmudgeons, it’s out of concern for the responsibility that has been passed on to our generation and making sure it is passed on to the next generation. That does not happen through acquiescence or silence. You have to stand your ground.

Some of what concerns us may seem trivial. From colleagues we sometimes get the “Oh, there you go again,” reaction, or “I don’t see what’s the matter with that, why fight it?” Trivial as they may seem, however, they do reflect larger issues that go to our very identity. Other concerns are not so much dismissed as trivial, but their long-term implications are not always understood or appreciated.

Naming Rights
At a time when nearly everything has been made gender neutral, we may sound a bit, well, old-fashioned when we object to use of the word “fisher” to replace fisherman/fishermen or even fisherwoman/fisherwomen. Our issue is not so much with the word “fisher” – which, by the way, is the name of a member of the weasel family – as it is with who decides what name fishing women and men are called by.

Some 35 or more years ago, staff at PCFFA were wondering how soon the organization’s name would have to be changed to comply with the political correctness of the time. The Federation of Fly Fishermen had changed its name and it seemed that groups with fisherman/fishermen in their title would soon acquiesce as well. That’s when a group of West Coast women in the fisheries revolted. In response to a directive from the Carter Administration’s Department of Labor, that those in fisheries would hereafter be referred to as “fishers,” the women said no, thank you. They basically told the Labor Department, in a letter reprinted in the Wall Street Journal, that they liked the term fisherman/fishermen in their title would soon acquiesce as well. That’s when a group of West Coast women in the fisheries revolted.

Arguably, being called a “hooker,” a “dragger,” a “crabber,” a “gillnetter,” a “longliner,” or a “troller” may seem as demeaning as being called a weasel, but the point is that the decision on what to be called should be made by those who have to live with the moniker, not by a government bureaucrat, academic or a member of the press. It’s time we stood our ground on what fishing women and men are called, it’s not up to someone else.

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A Nation’s Industry or an Agency Plaything

This too, may seem trivial at first, but the importance our nation places on its fisheries is reflected in where the governing fishery agency is placed and what it’s called. Keep in mind there was no federal fishery agency until President Grant named Spencer Baird as the first US Fisheries Commissioner. The agency that was subsequently created came to be known as the US Commission on Fish & Fisheries in the latter part of the 19th Century. At the turn of the 20th Century it became the US Bureau of Fisheries in the Department of Commerce, and in the late 1940s was transferred to the Department of Interior as part of the US Fish & Wildlife Service and called the Bureau of Commercial Fisheries (there was also a Bureau of Sport Fisheries).

In the early 1970s, as part of a Nixon Administration reorganization, the marine and salmon programs of the Bureaus of Commercial Fisheries and Sport Fisheries were combined to form the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), and placed in a newly formed “wet NASA,” (stemming from the Stratton Commission Report) along with the National Weather Service and some other marine related federal functions, in what was called the National Oceanic & Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) in the Department of Commerce.

Shortly after NMFS’ formation, the new agency — as a result of the 1976 passage of the Fishery Conservation & Management Act (now called the Magnuson-Stevens Act) — had thrust upon it regulatory functions and responsibility for fisheries in a vast zone from 3-200 miles offshore, along with supporting eight regional fishery councils. NOAA, meanwhile, seemingly suffering an identity crisis and anxious for attention, has been plastering its name all over the better known Weather Service and NMFS, along with other agencies for the past two decades as if it were a NASCAR sponsor.

What that has done, whether intended or not, has been to marginalize the importance of our nation’s fisheries. No longer was it the National Marine Fisheries Service, but “NOAA Fisheries” — as if US fisheries were now the plaything of NOAA bureaucrats. Of course, “NOAA Fisheries” is not actually the legal name — Congress has certainly not agreed to it — but that name’s use in fisheries circles, even by some in the fishing industry, has nonetheless acted to diminish the importance given America’s oldest industry.

Bear in mind, no other federal agency has suffered this kind of indignity. No one is calling the USCG by “Homeland Security Coast Guard,” or the USMC as “Department of Defense Marines.” So where do the does NOAA get off calling NMFS “NOAA Fisheries”?

It’s time we stood our ground and stopped NOAA from marginalizing our fisheries. Don’t use the term, and correct everyone that uses it — whether it’s a NMFS employee, a fishery council member or a colleague.

Protecting What and Why

Another area of concern has to do with marine protected areas (MPAs). We’re not talking about blanket opposition to MPAs — they can after all, if properly designed, be a useful tool for some limited purposes. Rather, we’re talking about the acquiescence of some to allowing self-serving academia or environmental campaigners to dictate the siting and sizing of MPAs, with little regard for science, the purpose of a specific reserve, consideration of alternatives, or guidelines for evaluation and monitoring. We cannot just go along with any MPA, nor can we be silent in the face of outrageous claims made for MPAs.

Protecting access for the current and future fishing fleets to our fishing grounds is critical. Fishing women and men have to stand their ground against ill-conceived MPAs or outrageous claims made for them.

Privatizing Public Resources

Another issue of access has to do with the implementation of individual fishing quotas and some other forms of “catch shares.” Fish, water, and air, unlike land, have long been held in western civilization to be public trust resources, from Roman law to English common law to current US law. Despite this long tradition, however, there has been (over the past 25 years or so) a “neo-liberal” effort to privatize publicly owned water and fish resources under the guise of conservation.

The advent of individual fishing quotas (IFQs) has now opened up our fishery resources to privatization. Admittedly some forms of IFQs may help make fisheries safer and more profitable, and may actually help fishing communities. Certainly those allocated quota in the halibut/black cod IFQ program have benefitted. Those participating in the Gulf red snapper fishery or the BSAI crab fishery generally like those systems. And no doubt taking away the derby element of some of these fisheries can help make them safer and allow participants (that is, if they actually own the quota) to fish when market conditions are best.

But the problem with IFQs or certain other types of share systems arises when quota ownership is extended outside of those actually fishing, to where anyone can hold or own quota. This leads to gross economic speculation. At that point, access to fishing becomes extremely expensive — and fishing becomes a struggle to purchase quota on a wide open market against all forms of speculation or, more likely, having to work someone else’s quota as a sharecropper with 25 percent or more of revenues coming off the top as “rent.”

Aside from the unnecessary loss of vessels and jobs that comes about following initial allocation of quota — such as happened in the BSAI crab fishery — or the massive consolidation of fishery ownership, such as happened in the Mid-Atlantic surf clam fishery, there are also the steep rents imposed by non-fishing entities owning quota, such as the Nature Conservancy’s rental of West Coast groundfish quota. Or worse, these shares can ultimately wind up in the hands of banks or other large financial institutions that care nothing about fishing communities or sustainability, only about profits.

Making matters worse, even for those who were issued initial quota, is the high cost of observers combined with extensive bookkeeping requirements, all designed to force small boat operators out of the fishery. Thus, while there may be some initial benefit from IFQs, an unfettered IFQ system results over time in massive consolidation, third party ownership of quota, higher costs incurred by those actually fishing and lower pay for crewmembers. And most fishermen become mere sharecroppers.

In the 1996 MSA reauthorization, Congress — which never authorized the de facto privatization of fishery resources resulting from unfettered IFQ systems — ordered NMFS to develop standards for implementing IFQs. NMFS ignored that and Congress failed to follow-up on
the issue with the agency. Again, in the 2006 MSA reauthorization, Congress authorized issuance of quota to “community fishing associations (CFAs),” but again NMFS has failed to even develop regulations for CFAs or their ownership of quota. Meanwhile quota is already being issued or traded, and the only option for CFAs, assuming those regulations are finally developed, is to buy quota on the open market. NMFS will again have thwarted Congressional will, this time by giving all the quota away before CFAs are even up and running.

It’s time for the fishing industry to stand its ground against NMFS and neo-liberal groups like the Environmental Defense Fund and to insist that the decisions on IFQs/catch shares are the fleet’s to vote on through a referendum.

All such programs must also limit quota ownership solely to those engaged in fishing.

**Conclusion**

The fate of our industry is in our own hands as much as those of outside forces. If we continue to acquiesce, if we remain silent, we have no one but ourselves to blame for what is lost. We have to stand our ground.

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