FORTY YEARS AGO WHEN I FIRST became involved in commercial fishing, I thought fishing was the easy part and catching was the tough part. Now, just being able to get on the water in an area where you want to fish seems almost impossible. Over the past forty years the “web of regulations” (Federal as well as State) have whittled-down the ocean to a fraction of what it used to be. And if that wasn’t enough, some well-funded environmental organizations are waging nothing short of war on our way of life.

You don’t have to look far to see examples of what I’m talking about. Last spring, a California legislator authored a bill (AB 2019, Fong) that would have outlawed driftnetting for swordfish. Keep in mind, however, this fishery is already one of the most regulated of any we have. There are sonar pingers on the nets to avoid marine mammal interactions, there are on-board observers, the fishery is already restricted from much of the ocean to avoid turtle interactions, and in the areas that are open to the fleet (or what’s left of it), fishermen have to fight bad weather offshore.

None of this seemed to make any difference to the legislator or the bill’s proponents. No consideration was given for the hard work over the past thirty years to make the fishery as selective as possible and to avoid mammals, turtles, prohibited species or those with no market value. No consideration was given to the marketplace and where the fish would come from if these short nets were banned. Nor was any consideration given to the impact that foreign fisheries would end up having when they become the suppliers of these fish and what effect their unrestricted fishing would have on marine mammals, sea birds and sea turtles. Proponents didn’t even think about all the lost jobs and income to our fishermen if the bill passed. Their glib answer was, “well they can just fish with harpoons,” as if such a fishery would be economically feasible or could even work in most Pacific waters, save for a few small areas off Southern California.

If it weren’t for the hard work of a few dedicated people this bill would have passed (it failed in committee). And, the battle over the nets still isn’t over.

Then, in July, we learned that Seafood Watch (the Monterey Bay Aquarium’s seafood pocket guides) moved Dungeness crab from “Best Choices” to “Good Alternative” on its West Coast Consumer Guide. This move was not based on any evidence that the fishery is not sustainable, but rather on “the lack of science” in its management. Some-how I don’t get it.

This is the type of mentality we must deal with to keep ourselves in business. It is a result of growing pressure from people who want only to view the ocean as a painting or from the picture window of their villa in some coastal enclave; the attitude of those who think the ocean is their exclusive playground for snorkeling, sea kayaking and jet skiing. It is certainly not the mentality of those of us who work on the ocean. We understand well that it is a dynamic, dangerous, and complex living environment that provides us with some of the most healthy food available to mankind.

We find ourselves at a time in the evolution of our industry where we must “up our game” if we intend to stay in business. In the past, most of us left the political work to someone else because in our eyes it was more important to go fishing. That must change if we want to maintain our markets and see our industry survive.

By this, I mean our industry has to concern itself about more than immediate profitability. It has to fight for the health of the fish themselves if we are to have a future as fishermen. Neither government, nor green NGOs can be entrusted to do this.

Second, there must be a pathway for crewmembers to become captains,
for new people to enter the fisheries and take ownership of them. Without addressing these two fundamental issues, there will be no future for our aging fleet; it will become more and more difficult to advance younger crew members, if at all; and our markets will go to other outside sources.

Thus, I believe we are entering a new era of involvement. If each fisherman is not spending at least 20 percent of his time and 10 percent of his income on fishing related solutions the future will surely be dim. I fear now that future generations of fishing men and women will be lost if all we worry about is catching fish, our allocations or our quotas.

What we have today didn’t just happen. Looking back over the past I remember that it was my organization, the Fishermen’s Marketing Association of Bodega Bay (FMA Bodega), that did the unthinkable in the early 1960’s (before my time). It successfully halted the construction of a nuclear power plant on Bodega Head (right on top of the San Andreas Fault). If we hadn’t teamed-up with a waitress from The Tides, a young Sierra Club activist, and an eccentric marine biologist, and had we not spoken up, or had we not protested, Bodega Bay could very well have become the Fukushima of the West Coast.

My port does not have a harbor district, so it was my organization (again, before my time) that applied for and secured the Economic Development Act’s (EDA’s) grant for the planning of a new and modern marina – what is now Spud Point. FMA Bodega was the only fishing organization in the nation to engage in such an undertaking – and if it had not, our local fleet would still be tied to moorings in the bay, and a lucky few might have side ties to a local processor’s pier or, if they were small enough, get a slip in one of the small marinas built for recreational boats.

My organization also understood that it had to extend its voice beyond our local area, and so was one of the founders of the Pacific Coast Federation of Fishermen’s Associations (PCFFA). This brought together more than a dozen local port associations into a regional organization with a full-time staff. It was PCFFA then, as one of its first legislative initiatives in 1976, that got language written into California’s new Coastal Act to declare commercial fishing a coastal dependent activity; require the protection of commercial fishing facilities; and where feasible, require the upgrading of those facilities. If it were not for that language, our fishing ports would have been overrun with resort and condominium developments and recreational boating marinas.

My organization’s work through the PCFFA did not stop there. We successfully (with the advice from a sister association in Santa Barbara) stopped offshore oil development north of the Santa Maria River and have carried the fight for 40 years to protect and enhance our salmon stocks (launching and defending numerous lawsuits). We also made the case for a herring roe fishery and opened up the San Francisco Bay fishery to set gillnets. We initiated the first legislation for trap limits in the Dungeness crab fishery – and the list goes on. Young fishermen have a fishery to enter today because of the hard work of a few people and their organizations in the past.

My organization and PCFFA and its member groups are not alone. Look at what the Columbia River Fisherman’s Protective Association did to save the salmon fishery back in the 1930’s when the dams were going in on the Columbia. Fish passage at those dams – better than we did in California – happened because of the work of that basin’s commercial fishermen. Sport anglers on the Columbia would have no salmon today, save for the hard work of the gillnetters 75 years ago.

For those fishing in Alaska, I don’t have to tell you of the value of your associations’ fighting for your fishing. In the case of the proposed Pebble Mine in the Bristol Bay watershed, fighting for the fish and fish habitat is essential. Albacore fishermen know, or should know, of the good that has happened for that fishery as a result of the work of the Western Fishboat Owners Association (WFOA) and the American Fishermen’s Research Foundation (AFRF).

All of this is to say that the fisheries we have today are the result of a lot of hard work and some success of dedicated individuals and commercial fishing associations. Remember, those same individuals and association members also had to struggle to get started in fishing. They put in long hours, they had families and bills to pay, but that was not used to excuse themselves from doing the work that needed doing and from attending to the needs of the greater fishing community.

With all the pressures now on our fisheries, (from dealing with the impacts of climate change and trying to understand ocean acidification, to certain Big Green organizations willing to make fishermen and fisheries their whipping boys) our work going forward will certainly not end.

There will be no shortage of future challenges. There’ll be more ENGO press releases issued and fundraising campaigns launched attacking fishermen. Wall Street financiers now covet our fisheries and other food production. We will need to be organized and united in our thinking. Otherwise, all our efforts would continue to fall on what seems to be the “deaf ears of an indifferent fishery bureaucracy,” which mostly just wishes we’d go away.

Last year I sold my boat and I plan to step down at the end of my current term as FMA Bodega President, working this year to help finish up the establishment of a local Community Fishing Association (CFA) I’ve done what I could, but it’s now time to turn the reins over to a new generation. I have no doubt of your capabilities to catch fish and encourage you all to get more involved.

I don’t have any advice for you on particular fishing gear or fishing spots. Rather, I want to emphasize, again, two things:

First, take care of the fish and they’ll take care of you. Just showing up for state fishery commission or regional fishery council meetings is not enough. They mostly just divide up what fish are available. We have to be in those
forums and making our voices heard where the fate of our fish stocks, not just who they’re allocated to, is determined.

Second, our time spent fishing is transitory. We owe a debt of gratitude to those who fought for the fisheries in the past and we owe it to future generations to fight for the fisheries during our watch. I won’t repeat the old Pogo line about us being our own worst enemy, but surely there will be no fisheries in the future if people just fish as if the fishery was just bestowed on them, or leave it by selling out to some third party simply because they are the highest bidder with no regard for future fishing generations.

For that reason I urge upon all of you to adopt the “20 /10 Rule” – 20 percent of your working time and 10 percent of your income should go to your association and the betterment of the fishing community. It’s really a small price to pay for a profession that has given us such freedom and beauty and rewarded many of us handsomely economically. I wish all of you the best.

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