WE’VE HEARD IT ALL BEFORE, IN one variation or another: “They’re trying to steal our fish,” or “They just want to put us out of business.” “They” might mean government or some large private interest, “environmentalists,” or even other fishermen, usually sport interests.

Sounding exaggerated, with a touch of paranoia and a hint of conspiracy, nevertheless these complaints too often have some merit. The most recent, a seeming mix of the first two, is “They’re trying to steal our business.” We dismiss this whine at our own peril.

Consider the complaint made about allocation, the taking of fish from one group and giving them to another. This has played out in one form or another, in numerous instances, over the past century.

Eighty years ago sport fishing groups successfully stopped the commercial striped bass fishery in California, lobbying the State legislature to reallocate the fish to recreation, even though stripers had been imported to California fifty years before – rightly or wrongly – to establish a commercial fishery. California isn’t the only place where the battle for striped bass has occurred; there are still skirmishes along the fish’s native Atlantic seaboard, where a few sport groups still practice “conservation” by trying to eliminate the other guy – in this case, the commercial fishery.

At the same time commercial striped bass fishing was eliminated on California’s Bay-Delta estuary, sport interests succeeded in banning commercial fishing, including by tribal members, on the California’s rivers – including the Eel, the Klamath, and the Smith, that at one time had canneries. Only the Bay-Delta was left open for the commercial salmon net fishery and that was closed by 1957. That action did lead finally to recognition by the sportfishing leadership that salmon were at risk with or without commercial fishing, due to the massive habitat losses taking place inland. But it was only after the commercial in-river closures that ocean commercial fishermen and sport anglers decided to stop fighting each other and begin working together to save what was left of the resource.

Fishing groups seeking to reallocate a greater portion or all of the fish to themselves continues to this day. We saw it last year in the effort to ban the historic gillnet fishery on the Columbia River. That had nothing to do with conservation; it was simply powered by a Gulf of Mexico-based recreational fishing group seeking to make a name for itself in the Northwest, under the false guise of conservation, by eliminating the Columbia’s commercial fishermen. They nearly succeeded, with that commercial fishery now limited to an untried seine fishery on hatchery stocks.

For Tribal salmon fishermen, a long battle ensued to get an allocation of the fish that were promised them in 19th century treaties. The 1974 Boldt Decision led to two decades of litigation that finally settled the Tribal/non-Tribal fishery allocation issue. It was ugly and unfortunate and even led to battles between various sectors of the non-Tribal fleet about whose fishery was better, or whose fishery should be granted the greater non-Tribal share.

In Alaska, a similar battle has been raging over halibut as charter interests have sought and taken part of the commercial allocation; allocation skirmishes between fishing groups continue in other parts of the country, including for red snapper in the Gulf of Mexico.

One of the best reads on the allocation struggle between commercial and recreational fisheries is Robert Frichey’s 1994 text, “Wetland riders,” which shows that these complaints are not mere exaggerations fueled by paranoia and conspiracy theory. But our purpose here is not to rekindle old animosities, particularly considering the mutual benefit that has occurred as a result of various fishery user groups working together to protect and enhance fish stocks.

Nor have allocation battles been solely between commercial and recreational
were established to close fishing in areas where sea otters were dying from a disease directly related to run-off pollution. Yet nothing was done about the original problem. So what is being protected? The public was misled, thinking protections were in place when in fact there were none.

Worse still was the federal government’s creation of a massive MPA in US territorial waters in the Western Pacific. President Bush in 2009, during his last days in office, created three national monuments (MPAs) – the Marianas Trench, the Rose Atoll, and the Pacific Remote Islands. It was never clear what was actually being protected, what was threatened or even where the science was. They were established by an Administration looking for an environmental fig leaf while not threatening oil interests or any of its other major supporters. What it did was sacrifice a few, small and local fishing businesses to give “environmental cred” to some pols and Big Green.

Making matters worse, when Secretary of State John Kerry held his Oceans Summit last June in DC, despite all the threats to the ocean, all the President did was expand upon Bush’s Pacific Remote Islands Marine National Monument. There was no science saying it was needed, nor identification of any imminent threat such a designation would thwart. It was a feel-good gesture by the Obama Administration to gain cred with groups such as Conservation International and WWF, actually had nothing to do with conservation, and undermined local fishing groups. Their complaint about being put out of business is nothing to be shrugged off – they were.

We have learned a bit about how to deal with the first two threats. The third may be the most ominous of all: the theft of fishermen’s businesses and the reappearance of the company town, this time not controlled by large fishing companies, but Wall Street financers.

In 2009 testimony to the Interagency National Ocean Task Force, Institute for Fisheries Resources President (and fisherman) Pietro Parravano told the panel “the three big issues [for the 21st Century] will be water, food, and energy, overlaid by climate change.” These will be the sources of conflict, and for those who control them, the source of wealth.

Food security has largely been a non-issue in most of the world since World War II. The rise of the so-called “Green Revolution” – based largely on pesticide/herbicides, dramatically increased food production over the past 60 plus years. Malnutrition and starvation were largely local, attributable mostly to problems of food distribution, not supply.

All that is beginning to change, however. First, the “Green Revolution,” based on artificial inputs, was not sustainable, as we’re finding out with soil depletion and the rise of super bugs/super weeds. Second, the human population continues to grow, putting a strain on available food supplies. Making matters worse, diets are changing in the developing world with increased wealth in nations such as China, India and Brazil and the subsequent increased demand for meat and other protein sources. Third, climate change and more erratic weather conditions will adversely affect crop production. In fishing, northward shifts of stocks and increased ocean acidification are expected to reduce wild and farmed fish production.

All of this is not being lost on those looking ahead to the turn of the next century. China, for example, is buying farmlands in Africa and South America since it can no longer feed its population from what it grows. In the US, companies such as Monsanto are seeking to develop monopolies over seed production. And on Wall Street, bankers and financiers are beginning to invest in food systems. This is not, however, about infusing needed capital into farming communities, but transferring capital wholesale from farms to Wall Street.

In some instances, financial control over farm production can be accomplished through the purchase of farmlands. In other instances, however, capitalists are looking for ways to secure control over food production without having to own or even manage the land, which can be done through a highly cen-
tralized distribution system, where large food corporations control largely one-sided contracts with individual farmers for production of commodity crops.

The fishing community is not immune to all this. The rise of “catch share” programs, or individual fishing quotas (IFQs), particularly those not restricting quota ownership to working fishing men and women, has greased the way for third party control of our fisheries. When working in concert with government or big green NGOs (Environmental Defense Fund, for example) financiers can get unfettered catch shares implemented. Fishing communities are also more vulnerable when fishing is highly restricted; fishermen may come to see catch shares as their salvation, making them easier to put in place.

Severely curtailing fishing, whether warranted or not (for example, restrictions on certain Pacific Coast groundfish stocks), allows third party investors to buy quota relatively cheaply. Once they have control, of course, fishing restrictions can be eased and profit taking can begin.

Fishermen no longer owning the quota for the fish they catch are left as sharecroppers, with 25 percent or more of the catch value going to a third party. Instead of owning fleets, like 19th century fishing companies, control over fishing in the 21st century will be through quota ownership. Financiers won’t have the expense and bother of actually owning boats.

In the September issue of Commercial Fishing News (an East Coast fishing publication), Brett Tolley of the North Atlantic Marine Association wrote, of New England’s groundfish fishery, “[a] dvocates of the catch share approach promised higher prices to fishermen, better stewardship over the ocean, and a general improvement in fishermen’s livelihoods. Instead we’re seeing an unaffordable quota leasing market where Georges Bank cod (east) leased last year for an average cost of $2.48 per pound while the average ex-vessel price to the boat was $1.08 per pound.”

What all this means is that the fleet must be on guard against Wall Street speculators and pliant government bureaucrats or NGOs promoting catch shares. Keeping fishing communities from becoming “company towns” is going to require vigilance on all our parts.

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