Marine Policy xx (xxxx) xxxx–xxxx

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Marine Policy

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/marpol

Participation and resistance: Alternative seafood marketing in a neoliberal era

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
Alternative seafood marketing
Community supported fisheries
Local seafood
Value chains
Food systems
Neoliberal policy

ABSTRACT

This paper suggests that detrimental effects of certain neoliberal fisheries policies are key drivers behind the development of alternative seafood marketing programs in North America. It examines the structures, market and non-market values, and challenges of these programs. The primary aim of the research, based on interviews involving 20 programs and a conference workshop, was to advance understanding of the market value of alternative seafood marketing to fishers and communities. However, the importance of a broader set of non-market values was repeatedly highlighted by those engaged in these programs. Overall, the research suggests that alternative seafood marketing can enable fishers to participate in fisheries managed by neoliberal, market-based policies, through the promotion of market values along their diverse value chains. At the same time, alternative seafood marketing appears to resist market-based fishing systems, sometimes through the promotion of broader, non-market outcomes. Common challenges along these alternative seafood value chains highlight the structural conflicts that exist while simultaneously participating in and resisting neoliberal fisheries structures.

1. Introduction

There has been a recent proliferation of alternative seafood marketing programs in North America, which connect small-scale fishers to consumers by way of partnering with or bypassing seafood processors and intermediary distributors. While taking various forms, these enterprises generally aim to shorten or streamline seafood supply chains in order to promote a host of economic, environmental, and social outcomes [1–5]. To an extent, the proliferation of alternative marketing is linked to consumers' increasing appetite for local, sustainable, healthy, traceable, and ethical sources of seafood, following reports of human rights violations [6], contaminated seafood [7], and mislabeling and seafood fraud [8] along commodity-scale or 'conventional' supply chains. However, connecting the emergence of these new businesses to consumer preferences alone obscures important trends within fisheries that are compelling fishers to take risks, experiment, and innovate with new approaches to distributing and marketing their catch [1].

The purpose of this paper is to bring greater attention to the drivers compelling fishers to participate in alternative seafood marketing programs, and to explore the diverse structures, market and non-market values, and challenges of these enterprises. Much of the existing literature has focused on the ecological [4] and socioeconomic [1,2] effects of one form of alternative seafood marketing: community supported fisheries (CSFs). For example, Stoll *et al.* (2015) document the price premiums achieved by fishers within a CSF in the Southeastern United States (US) and present a model for how such programs could produce different types of social capital [1]. However, further documentation of the other values generated by different types of alternative seafood marketing is warranted, given that these programs are highly diverse [5]. In addition, relatively limited attention has been given to the drivers behind these initiatives or to how they are linked to fisheries policy and management. In this study, both market and non-market values are categorized as they accrue along alternative seafood value chains, as are the challenges faced by these programs. Thus, this paper aims to present a broader view through utilization of a value chain approach and through examination of multiple types of alternative seafood marketing, as a means to begin investigating how and why these nascent enterprises are gaining traction.

The paper first discusses connections between neoliberal fisheries policies based on market-driven solutions and the growth of alternative seafood marketing in North America. Results from a unique qualitative value chain analysis of alternative seafood marketing programs are then presented, in order to describe the constellation of common values that these programs generate across their diverse value chains, and amidst common challenges to success. In presenting these data, the

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http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.marpol.2016.09.023
Received 12 September 2016; Received in revised form 12 September 2016; Accepted 13 September 2016
Available online xxxx
0308-597X/

paper explores how these new seafood businesses represent a means by which fishers are both adapting to and resisting neoliberal fisheries systems, so as to continue to operate within these systems at the same time as promoting alternative, non-market outcomes.

2. Background: What is the relationship of alternative marketing to neoliberal fisheries policies?

To be a fisher in North America today is far different than it was even a few decades ago. In the past four decades, the focus of fisheries policy has largely shifted from an emphasis on growth, expansion, and market development to species recovery and conservation [9,10]. While this process has played out differently in different regions as a result of diverse socioeconomic and ecological histories, there has been an overarching trend toward policies and practices based on neoliberal theories, which emphasize market-based approaches [9–11]. The widespread implementation of catch share programs, such as individual transferable quotas (ITQs), represents one of the most explicit examples of this pattern. Catch share programs grant resource privileges to individuals or groups rather than an entire fishing fleet, with the aim of discouraging the overexploitation of fishery resources by turning them into secure assets that can deliver long-term economic benefits to their owners [12–14]. Despite attempts at political interference to prevent these types of management strategies (i.e., Jones Amendment, US, 2013) [15] and dissenting opinions about their success in achieving positive ecological outcomes [9,16–19], catch share programs have been increasing in North America and globally [9–11].

Catch shares align with neoliberal theory, which emphasizes private property rights, economic efficiency, and a transfer of responsibility from the public to the private sector [10,14]. In exchange for taking on a greater level of accountability through a catch share system, fishers can simultaneously gain more flexibility and security. Thus, rather than racing to catch fish as quickly as possible [20], they can be strategic about when and how much they fish in a season [13]. Among other benefits, this allows fishers to use the market to their advantage, by pursuing high value outlets for their products and aligning their fishing effort with demand so that ex-vessel prices increase.

This phenomenon was documented in both the British Columbia (BC) and Alaska halibut fisheries after the transition from a derby fishery to a catch share system in 1991 and 1995, respectively. With the length of the fishing season extended and the supply of product entering the marketplace more stable, new markets were developed and there was a corresponding increase in ex-vessel prices. For example, in BC, ex-vessel prices for halibut grew from CA$2.4 per pound (/lb) in 1990 to CA$3.6/lb in 1994 [21], spiking above Alaskan ex-vessel halibut prices at the time [22,23]. According to Hermann (1996), the establishment of halibut quota in BC in 1991 was responsible for additional revenues of CA$23.2 million in the fishery from 1991 to 1994, equal to an ex-vessel price increase of CA$0.55–0.77/lb/year [21]. When Alaska introduced halibut quota in 1995, the price gap with BC lessened, and it is estimated that a minimum 10.5% increase in the state's ex-vessel halibut prices per year from 1995 to 2002 was attributable to its quota system[1] [23,24].

In addition to the abovementioned financial benefits, some have suggested that catch shares have facilitated the emergence of alternative seafood marketing, by providing fishers leeway to innovate. For example, Jane Lubchenco, former Administrator of the National Marine Fisheries Service, stated the following during her testimony on New England Groundfish Management to the US Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation in 2011, shortly after implementation of the Northeast Multiple Species Sector program in the Northeastern US [25]:

> New England fishermen are beginning to realize new entrepreneurial opportunities under sector management. Here are three examples: (A) A group of small-boat fishermen in Rhode Island has started a new business to market their fish directly to local restaurants as 'boat to table.' (B) Another new company helps fishermen match their supply to consumers' demands across New England. (C) Fishermen in Port Clyde are making the most out of their catch through a Community Supported Fishery program. This program is similar to the Cape Ann Fresh Catch program started by the Gloucester Fishermen's Wives Association and supported by NOAA Sea Grant. Customers give the fishing community financial support in advance of the season, and in turn the fishermen provide a weekly share of seafood during the harvesting season. This innovative marketing program is leading to higher quality fish and higher profits. In each case, the sector program provided fishermen with the flexibility to be entrepreneurial and innovative, and to control the destiny of their small businesses. In each case, fishermen have been freed from overly burdensome regulations, and they can fish more safely.

This statement suggests a direct and positive correlation between neoliberal fisheries management approaches and the recent emergence of alternative seafood marketing. While this view is consistent with the market-based logic of catch shares, it seems misaligned with the realities of seafood marketing and distribution. Rather, the rapid proliferation of alternative marketing is taking place within a crowded and competitive seafood economy grounded in established relationships between fishers and seafood purveyors. Such connections have long been necessary for fishers to get their product to market, and over time many fishers have become dependent on the services that are provided by seafood buyers and processors, including provision of fuel, ice, and dockage. Engaging in alternative marketing can disturb these existing relationships, presenting financial and logistical risks to fishers who choose to market their catch in new ways [2].

The willingness of fishers to jeopardize their relationships with traditional buyers may be linked to an increase in catch shares and other neoliberal fisheries policies that constrain fishing access. Indeed, there is multi-regional evidence of the disproportionate burden that rural coastal communities and small-scale and independent fishers often bear under these policies [26–29]. In attempting to solve environmental externalities and achieve economic efficiency, catch shares alter the nature of marine resources, transforming them from public goods to quasi-private property. In doing so, the price of resource access subsequently increases, creating strong barriers to entry for those with limited access to financial resources. For example, in the lobster fishery in Southwest Nova Scotia, Canada, licenses to enter the fishery cost approximately CA$0.25 prior to license privatization, and reached over CA$500,000 in the years following privatization (see Barnett et al. [30]). In this case and others, small-scale operators must subsequently lease fishing access rights from private corporations, increasing their operational costs [11,29,30]. Such expenses can be difficult to bear, particularly as ex-vessel prices fluctuate, and are exacerbated by other effects of fisheries privatization, including private

[1] It should be noted that most of the benefits of these ex-vessel price increases accrue to the owners of fishing quota, who in large part lease their quota to active fishers. In BC, halibut fishers pay around 70% of the value of the catch in order to lease quota. In addition, the share of crew wages from catch value has also decreased since the introduction of ITQs in BC's halibut fishery. Pinkerton and Edwards (2009) explain that crew members received 10–20% of the catch value from the fishery prior to ITQ implementation, and 1–5% afterwards. Thus, while the value of BC's halibut fishery increased by 25% from 1990 to 2007, the portion of that value earned by crew dropped by 73% [29]. Pinkerton (2013) notes that there are alternative systems for eliminating the race to fish, which offer more equitable outcomes than catch share systems. For example, in the BC halibut fishery, fisher organizations used the "lay-up" system for 40 years in order to spread out fishing effort while also allocating fishing access in a balanced manner among various members of the fleet [93].