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Describing the diversity of community supported fishery programs in North America



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ABSTRACT

This research investigates organizational diversity within Community Supported Fisheries (CSFs) in North America. Generally understood as the direct marketing of seafood through pre-arranged deliveries, CSFs have increased in number and geographic distribution since their origin in 2007. Despite, or because of, this rapid growth, fundamental questions remain unanswered about what organizational structures and business practices currently constitute the term 'CSF'. This research draws on interview data from 22 CSFs to highlight the diversity within the CSF movement and inform ongoing debates about appropriate paths for their continued growth. Interview data is used to describe key areas of convergence and divergence among the goals, business practices, and structures of CSFs. Three general types of CSF are identified based on this analysis: harvester focused, consumer focused and species focused. Each type is described through a short illustrative case study. Overall results indicate that the term 'CSF' does not currently refer to a specific structure or type of organization, but rather an approach to seafood marketing used by a variety of organizations with broadly similar production philosophies centered on engaging and informing consumers around traceable, domestically sourced seafood. Acknowledgment of CSFs as diverse and socially embedded organizations is necessary to understanding their potential benefits.

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1. Introduction

Community Supported Fisheries (CSFs) have emerged in recent years as a prominent trend in North American seafood distribution. Based on the Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) system, CSFs have been generally understood to involve the direct marketing of seafood from fishers to consumers through regular, pre-arranged deliveries of product [4,5,12]. CSF programs have rapidly increased in number and geographic distribution since they first emerged in 2007. Over the course of their existence, CSFs have also adopted new business practices, structures and goals that challenge accepted understanding of CSFs. This research draws on data from 22 CSFs in Canada and the United States to characterize the diversity that underlies the CSF movement and explore the implications of this diversity for understanding the social function of these nascent forms of organizing fisheries commercialization. In the findings, key areas of convergence and divergence among CSFs are highlighted, and three general types of

CSFs are identified, each type described through a short illustrative case study. The overarching goal is to bring clarity to the complex question of what CSFs are in practice.

Since CSF is a self-adopted label with no formal standardization to date, many arrangements vary in fundamental aspects of their philosophy and design. This variability is likely indicative of multiple factors, including the relative newness of the concept and the diverse social and ecological contexts in which CSFs are emerging. While such diversity is not necessarily surprising, and is perhaps an inevitable function of the evolution of these commercialization and marketing arrangements across the heterogeneous landscape of fisheries, it represents a source of mounting tension as the concept is attached to an ever wider range of marketing arrangements. In particular, this diversity has become a source of concern for some CSF owners, who have advocated for the development of criteria for CSFs, to ensure that certain production standards are met and that the designation continues to hold value and meaning with and among consumers. This tension sets the stage for the eventual enclosure of the concept – a path that is not uncommon in fisheries [22]. At stake is the trade-off between exclusion of certain models, approaches, or individuals, on the one hand, and on the other hand, the protection of certain underlying goals and values. As CSFs continue to find success and emerge in

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new locations, debates about the trajectory of this movement take on greater importance. Understanding the current realities of CSFs is a fundamental first step for these processes to move forward constructively.

The implications of diversity also extend to academic and policy communities, where researchers have attempted to describe the broader social and environmental benefits that CSFs provide (e.g. [12,21]). While these works acknowledge diversity among CSFs, this diversity has not been characterized broadly in terms of specific organizational structures, goals, and business practices. This knowledge is necessary in continuing to explore the implications of CSFs for economic development and fisheries management, as well as for understanding questions related to their social function and impact on fishing communities.

This research does not attempt to directly define what CSFs should be, but rather treat them as local manifestations of a broader trend in seafood distribution and fisheries that are being shaped and reshaped by particular socio-environmental contexts. The dominance of globalized food production networks has spurred desire to reassert the importance of place in food system relationships for both socio-cultural and environmental reasons [5,8]. If CSFs are in part a political project in defense of a particular place or set of food production ethics, it should be expected that the structure of CSFs would vary somewhat based on the underlying qualities of the communities they emerge in. Such an approach allows for recognition that the definition of CSF is multiple and dynamic, being iteratively contested among CSF producers and negotiated with consumers. Describing diversity is a necessary first step in understanding how the CSF concept becomes localized through processes of adaptation and negotiation within a particular place. The goal of this approach is to inform industry members, consumers, researchers and managers as CSFs and the debates surrounding them continue to develop.

2. Methods

The analytical approach used for this study consisted of semi-structured interviews and participant observation. Interviews were designed to gather data on the origins, goals, challenges, sourcing practices, distribution methods, and seafood sales of CSFs, while participant observation was used to inform the development of three case studies that allow for an in-depth understanding of the main different types of CSFs identified within the sample.

2.1. Semi-structured interviews

A total of 22 semi-structured interviews were conducted with CSF programs for this research (Table 1; Fig. 1). All 39 CSF programs known to be operating in the United States and Canada

Table 1
CSF interviews by region.

West Coast		East Coast		Island and Inland States	
State	Interviewee	State	Interviewee	State	Interviewee
AK	Coordinator	MA	Owner	HI	Coordinator
AK	Coordinator	ME	Owner	IL	Coordinator
BC	Owner	NC	Owner		
CA	Owner	NC	Owner		
CA	Owner	NJ	Coordinator		
CA	Owner	NY	Owner		
CA	Owner	NY	Owner		
WA	Owner	NY	Owner		
OR	Coordinator	NY	Owner		
OR	Owner	SC	Owner		

were invited to participate, 34 of which were identified through the online network LocalCatch.org, and 5 of which were identified through researcher contacts and internet searches. Seventeen of the invited CSFs either did not respond, declined to participate in the research, or logistical difficulties prevented the interview from taking place. The names of CSFs have been removed for anonymity.

Author AEB conducted all interviews in a semi-structured format, allowing for the order of topics and interview questions to be adjusted to best fit the flow of conversation. The semi-structured interview guide combined a mix of open-ended questions and closed-ended survey-like questions following the style illustrated in Ref. [1]. Interviews were conducted remotely (either by phone or Skype software for voice calling) in January and February 2015. Interview participants included CSF operators, managers and coordinators. Most interviewees ($n=16$) were also the owner or founder of the organization, and some ($n=5$) were also the fisher for the CSF or the spouse of the fisher.

Interview results were thematically coded into response categories to facilitate analysis and comparison. Categories emerged inductively from the data, upon review of all interview responses. The categories are intended to capture the central topics in the response data and organize it in a way that allows for comparison of similarities and differences in the philosophy, structure and operations of CSF programs. Descriptive statistics are provided for the most relevant coded themes and direct quantitative responses. Most of the detailed interview results are found in the supplementary material (Appendix A).

2.2. Participant observation

Participant observation data is used as a way to contextualize interview responses and as input to develop the short case studies. Three of the authors have been engaged in ongoing CSF work, serving as advisors for a CSF for 1 year (AEB), 2 years (BAD) and 6 years (JSS), and engaging with the CSF movement more broadly since 2009. Additionally, JSS created and continues to maintain a national CSF network through LocalCatch.org. These experiences provide the authors with the opportunity to practice “observant participation” [3], both on how the CSF movement has developed, and on the emergence of individual CSFs, and incorporate these lessons into the description of the case studies.

3. Results and analysis

CSFs represent a diversity of arrangements and operations (see Table 2 for the summary results). To explore how that diversity shapes understanding of CSFs, and provide a baseline understanding of the core elements characterizing CSFs, the results in Table 2 are synthesized into areas of unification and divergence across the sample. Groupings CSFs into three types based on the central focus of their organizational and operational arrangement – harvester, consumer, or fish species, is then proposed. These subgroups are introduced not to create artificial divisions within CSFs, but to better describe and present the similarities among CSF organizations. When taken as a whole, the unifying characteristics of CSFs may seem limited, however when CSFs are separated into these subgroups, robust linkages emerge within groups without a loss of the unifying characteristics that span across CSFs.

‘CSF’ is often used as a unifying term, implying a collection of programs with similar philosophies, structures and outcomes. However, instead, the results suggest a collection of different marketing seafood programs, with at least eight areas of divergence among CSFs (Table 3). For example, CSF programs varied philosophically, with no two organizations expressing the same set of goals for their CSF program. CSFs also differed operationally,

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