The Canadian North Atlantic Cod Fishery: A Case Study of Management and Conservation Policy

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The Northern Atlantic Cod (Gadus morhua) has represented a valuable economic resource to Canadian fishers for hundreds of years. In the late 1980’s, however, a collapse of cod stocks occurred. In 1992, drastic declines in cod populations forced the government of Canada to declare a moratorium on the cod fishery and allocate billions of dollars for fishery relief. Today, the moratorium is still in place, and the cod populations have not recovered. Several factors led to the collapse and continued moratorium: government fishery policy, industry overexploitation, an inability of science to accurately measure cod populations, and other more subtle factors that influenced the policy process. My paper’s goal is to explore reasons for this set of failures in order to determine what policies must be changed to foster success in the current cod recovery and future fishery management. The approach of Canada’s Department of Fisheries and Oceans (DFO) in setting fishery policy, and the economic, social, and political processes that influence the DFO, have come under close scrutiny in the past decade. Some institutional changes have occurred, but challenges remain. One option for the future is greater emphasis on the study and management of the aquatic ecosystem, in order to understand cod population trends. Although this change is a stated objective of the DFO, it is not yet being practiced. A second option is to open up the policy decision process to the Canadian public, allowing free exchange of fishery data between the DFO, the Fisheries Resource Conservation Council, and fishery stakeholders; in the past, information flow has been restricted to meet political ends. A third alternative is to address the potential impact of small regional food fisheries and cod bycatch mortality with adaptive management; although these are important cultural and economic activities, they may be slowing the cod recovery process. A fourth alternative is to further reduce and re-direct subsidies that support the maintenance of a fishery over-capacity in Eastern Canada. A fifth possibility is to address the means of moratorium termination now, in order to establish specific requirements for the re-initiation of the fishery, and avoid the possibility of premature re-initiation as a result of political and social pressure. These alternatives are relatively diverse, yet each is designed to remedy a different part of the same policy process. My recommendation is that all five of these changes be made to facilitate the recovery and future management of the cod population. The value of the resource justifies this effort.

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