Analyzing the role of NGOs in Creating Fisheries Policies that Protect the Socio-Economic Interests of Coastal Communities While Stabilizing Fish Populations

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The Gulf of Maine once supplied one of the most productive fisheries in the United States. Commercially valuable species such as cod, flounder, and haddock abounded in its waters, causing many fishing towns such as Gloucester, MA and Stonington, ME to grow on the New England coast. However, with the passage of the 1976 Magnuson-Stevens Act and increasingly efficient technology in the late 20th century, many of these once rich stocks began to suffer under the pressure of overfishing. Although the Magnuson Act created regional councils that were required to set acceptable catch limits for each fish stock, many stocks in New England began to crash under the New England Fisheries Management Council’s (NEFMC) lax regulation.

In 1991, recognizing that many fish in the Gulf of Maine were in danger of being effectively eliminated from the area by overfishing, the non-governmental organization (NGO) the Conservation Law Foundation (CLF) sued NEFMC for not following its mandate under Magnuson-Stevens. CLF’s victory forced NEFMC to create much stricter catch limits for many groundfish stocks; the new limits proved to be too low for many fishermen to survive economically. Groundfish fishermen, some of whose families had been fishing the same waters for generations, were forced out of the trade, and small boat groundfish fishermen gradually disappeared from the Gulf. As fishing towns suffered and fish stocks failed to recover, many NGOs followed CLF’s lead and began to try to influence fisheries management. Groups such as The Nature Conservancy (TNC), Northwest Atlantic Marine Alliance (NAMA), Penobscot East Resource Center (PERC), and Midcoast Fishermen’s Association (MFA) started working to encourage sustainable management and try to help protect fishing communities.

This summer, I studied the history and role of NGOs in fisheries management in the Gulf of Maine. Because little previous work exists on the subject, I conducted my research mainly through interviews with NGO workers across the region. Many of the questions I asked focused on subjects such as NGOs’ goals, relationships with fishermen, and self-perceived role in the overall fisheries debate. Through my interviews, several trends appeared, and I began to sense a general division between different types of NGOs. Although none of these divisions are definitive, they do appear to affect the way that NGOs function and the type of influence they exert.

The first major division that became apparent was between large and small NGOs. The large NGOs that I interviewed—The Nature Conservancy, The Ocean Conservancy, and the Conservation Law Foundation—were either national or regional, and focused on many different issues outside of fisheries. The small NGOs—Penobscot East Resource Center, Northwest Atlantic Marine Alliance, and Midcoast Fishermen’s Association—operated locally and focused entirely on fisheries. Interestingly, the size of the organization was directly correlated to its purpose. The large NGOs focused on preserving biodiversity and protecting fish in the Gulf of Maine, while the small NGOs focused on protecting fishing communities and helping fishermen fish sustainably. One main indicator of purpose was the number of times the word “community” was mentioned in an interview. In two interviews with CLF, community was not mentioned at all, whereas in one interview with NAMA, the word was used nine times.

The focuses of the NGOs of different sizes corresponded to what they perceived as the overall role of NGOs in the debate. The large groups believed that NGOs should stand up for the law, serve as a counterweight to industry, and represent different values (such as biodiversity) in the fisheries management process. Alternately, the local organizations believed that NGOs should facilitate cooperative research between fishermen and scientists, provide a long-term perspective to the fishermen, and give fishermen a voice in the management process. Fishermen are rarely able to take off enough time to attend the NEFMC meeting that determine how a fishery will be run, so the last objective can be particularly important to the survival of the small boat fishermen. If performed well, these divergent purposes can crucially complement each other in helping to successfully and sustainably manage fisheries in the Gulf of Maine.

NGOs can exert a powerful influence in fisheries policy. A more thorough understanding of their goals and philosophies will help potential donors and grant funders determine which groups to support, as well as promote meaningful collaborations between NGOs. Through my research this summer, I believe I have uncovered a key distinction between NGOs that was previously unrecognized.
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