

Revisiting Scallop Management

The Quoddy Tides Editorial

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Maine's scallop fishery is now going through the same boom-and-bust cycles that have hit other fisheries, in part because the Department of Marine Resources is slow to adopt regulations that would help sustain the resource.

In considering options for how management should be changed, a look at the history of the fishery and the differences along the coast is useful. Compared to other fishing areas in the state, the Cobscook Bay area is very small, with only 0.6 square miles per scallop dragging license, compared to 23.89 square miles per dragging license in the Sheepscot area. Scallops also are more important to the local fishing economy around Cobscook Bay than in other areas of Maine, which depend more heavily on the lobster fishery. In 2010, there were 96 scallop licenses and 100 lobster licenses in the Cobscook area, while in the western Penobscot area there were 81 scallop licenses and 1,114 lobster licenses.

Partly because of their dependence on the fishery, Cobscook Bay fishermen have led the way and worked hard to protect the resource. They are the ones who pushed the state to establish a smaller drag size limit, a daily catch limit, a larger minimum size for scallops, a meat count and increased enforcement penalties. And they have been successful in keeping the resource strong, as the bay has the last good scallop grounds left in the state. The fishery contributes significantly to the economy of the local communities, as a 2004-05 study found the Cobscook Bay scallop fishery was worth about \$1 million. But it wasn't always that way. A 1960 study reported that the Penobscot Bay and Casco Bay areas were the primary production areas for scallops, with the Quoddy region of marginal importance. Even in 1990 there were fewer than 25 boats fishing for scallops in Cobscook Bay. That has now changed, as other areas have been severely depleted. By 2000 there were 180 draggers in Cobscook Bay on the opening day. This year there were close to 100 boats, with about half of the active scallop fishermen in the state fishing in Cobscook Bay on the opening day.

Unfortunately, despite all of their efforts to manage the fishery so it can be sustainable, Cobscook Bay area fishermen are suffering through a very poor season this year because of the failure of management of the scallop resource along other areas of the coast. After all these years, the state is still struggling over how to best manage the fishery. What regulations would work well in limiting the taking of a public resource? Restrictions can run the gamut from gear type, length of season and limited entry to quotas. In looking at how to prevent depletion of a resource, the public should recognize that most fishermen are not greedy, but trying to catch as much as the next fellow if the resource is limited can lead to overfishing and the tragedy of the commons.

To match the fishing effort to the scallop resource, the state needs to deal in a different manner with the mobile fleet. A mobile fleet makes sense if a species is migratory like groundfish. But for non-migratory species such as lobsters, urchins, clams and scallops, a mobile fleet can descend on an area and wipe it out. If lobster boats from other ports all came into an area with a strong lobster fishery, such as Jonesport, they wouldn't be tolerated by the local lobster fishermen. That fishery, which is managed through seven zone councils along the coast, is healthy, in part because fishermen have pushed for regulations to ensure its sustainability.

Now is the time for the state to seriously think about changing its management of a fishery that is not healthy and reconsider the possibility of area management for scallops. While scallop fishery management may need to accommodate a mobile fleet for at least a period of time, the state should work to set up a framework so that fishermen can take responsibility for the local resource and invest in the future of their backyards. Area management, with zoning of the coast and a requirement for conservation work such as stock enhancement, could be an effective tool for preventing overfishing of scallop stocks. If fishermen are given the responsibility for cultivating the resource as one would tend a garden, the fishery could be made sustainable. That could give fishermen some hope for the future - hope that is now lacking.

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