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Port Clyde fleet changes to eco-friendly business model

By Daniel Dunkle
Business/Enterprise Reporter

PORT CLYDE (July 7): Increasingly, consumers have shown a willingness to pay a little more for fresher, more healthy food harvested in an environmentally friendly way.

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More and more people frequent farmers markets and natural food co-ops and buy shares in community supported agriculture operations.

Now, due to the efforts of Port Clyde's fishing fleet, this kind of sustainability doesn't end where the ocean begins.



Fisherman Gary Libby holds a halibut in this photo from the Island Institute website. (Image courtesy of Laura Kramar, Island Institute)

Facing a tough economic climate and fishing grounds that have been depleted by over-fishing in the past, the Port Clyde fishermen formed the Midcoast Fishermen's Association in April 2006. Since then, they have changed the business model to use more environmentally friendly fishing practices and provide the freshest, highest quality ground fish to local restaurants and markets. Their brand is Port Clyde Fresh Catch.

Rob Snyder, vice president of programs for the Island Institute, has met with the fishermen during this process. He said that for years the fishery used a very different business model.

"High volume, low quality fish at a low price," is how he explains the old method.

For nearly 30 years, however, many fishermen have been struggling with fish stocks that were overfished using that model. At one time, groundfish fleets were common up and down the coast, according to Snyder. The fishermen of the Port Clyde Draggermen's Co-op are the last remaining groundfishing fleet in Midcoast or Downeast Maine, according to the most recent Island Journal.

In addition, government management has caused many fishermen to lose access to the fish, Snyder said.



Now fishermen are trying to change the model to sustain the fishery for future generations. Instead of catching a lot of fish and selling them at a low price, they will catch fewer fish using more eco-friendly methods and sell them at a higher price, Snyder said.

The entire Port Clyde fleet of draggers has signed on, 12 boats in all. They drag for fish including cod, haddock and flounder.

"These guys hung on despite heavy odds," Snyder said.

He said there is a danger of Maine losing this piece of fishing heritage.

Local restaurants and markets, including Primo, Café Miranda, the Lily Bistro, Cod End, Big Fish Café, Jess' Market and The Dip Net, are taking advantage of the opportunity to buy the fish right off the boat or dock, Snyder said. These businesses can then advertise the freshness of their fish to their customers, who in many cases are willing to pay a little more for a better meal.

"Most of the food consumed in the United States travels 1,800 miles and changes hands six times," the Midcoast Fishermen's Association website explains. "In contrast, people who buy Port Clyde Fresh Catch seafood will know exactly where it comes from: the icy waters off the coast of Maine. The locally harvested, wild-caught fish they purchase has traveled only a few miles before reaching area restaurants and other outlets."

Snyder said this is possible because the fishermen sell close to home.

The Island Institute has helped by providing the Port Clyde Draggermen's Co-op with the services of Island Fellow Laura Kramar. She is helping with the marketing and promotion of Port Clyde Fresh Catch.

Kramar has a master's degree in resource economics and policy with a concentration on sustainable agriculture, according to Snyder.

Knowledge of agriculture is appropriate here, because the Port Clyde fishermen have been using the community supported agriculture model to market their fish as the region's first community supported fishery, according to Snyder and other Island Institute staff members. The Midcoast Fishermen's Association has worked with Rockland's Unitarian Universalist Church, allowing members to buy shares of shrimp delivered weekly at the church, according to Snyder's Island Journal article.

As part of the project, the fishermen are helping scientists conduct research on how they can fish in a more environmentally friendly way and reduce bycatch, or the hauling in of fish other than the desired species.

Snyder pointed out that fishermen will actually be sacrificing days that they could be fishing and earning income in order to make their boats available to researchers. The next round of research will be conducted about a month from now, he said.

The fishermen will be checking the way their net configurations impact the ocean floor and vital habitats. If a net has wider spaces in its grid, for example, that can allow more bycatch species to escape and it can reduce the amount of drag on the boat, decreasing the amount of fuel the vessel must burn. That's better for the environment. Fishermen are also looking at the impact of chafing gear that drags along the ocean bottom. Snyder said fishermen may be able to save fuel and the environment by eliminating this gear.

The Midcoast Fishermen's Association also provides local fishermen with a voice when dealing with government regulators.

Challenges remain, Snyder said. While Port Clyde Fresh Catch is making its way to what he calls "white tablecloths," the fishery needs more volume buyers. At this point, the fishermen sell only whole fish that haven't been filleted. He noted that there are legal anti-trust issues involved in having the fishermen catch the fish, process the fish and sell it to the restaurants directly. The fishermen cannot legally process the fish without violating these rules, he said. They are still looking to preserve the fishery, however, by taking some of the costly "middle men" out of the equation.

For now, those looking for the freshest catch can look for Port Clyde Fresh Catch.

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