Catch Limits vs. Catch Shares

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Catch limits are protective caps on the number of fish that can be caught in a fishing year. They are a fundamental measure to prevent overfishing and ensure the long-term sustainability of fish stocks. These measures are set based on scientific assessments of the health of fish stocks.[1]

In 2012, the United States successfully implemented annual catch limits in all 46 of its major fisheries.[2] These limits are paired with accountability measures that aim to prevent the total catch of that year from exceeding the annual catch limit, or to mitigate the negative consequences if it does.[3]

Catch limits are an important part of managing a sustainable fishery. But setting catch limits that balance the long-term health of both the fishery and the needs of fishermen depends on the accuracy of stock assessments.

The National Marine Fisheries Service faces chronic underfunding, which hinders its ability to produce frequent, cutting-edge stock assessments.[4] As a result, catch limits, which must be based on the best available science, err on the side of caution when faced with uncertainties about the health of a fishery. Collaborative research efforts with fishermen can help fill in some of these gaps, but sufficient funding is imperative.

Catch limits and accountability measures provide the first line of defense against overfishing. Combined with careful management that accounts for ecosystem particulars and fishing community welfare, catch limits are an essential part of ensuring the sustainability of fisheries.

Catch shares are a way of managing a fishery that has catch limits. Under catch shares, the annual catch is divided into portions that are granted, in perpetuity and for free, to individuals in the fishery. These shares of the fishery can be bought, sold and leased in private markets with little accountability.[5]

Catch shares drive fisheries to consolidate in the hands of fewer, larger fishing operations, putting many smaller-scale fishermen out of work and hurting the fishing communities that depend on them. Meanwhile, a privileged few benefit from exclusive access to a public resource.

Catch shares are not inherently a sustainable way to manage a fishery — they've been shown to increase discards, incentivize more damaging gear and prevent adaptive, ecosystem-based fishing management. Often, catch shares are claimed to be sustainable because they have catch limits, but catch limits can and have been established without catch shares. Implementing catch shares typically removes other measures to protect vulnerable spawning areas and other critical fish populations, and their rigidity fails to respond to both natural and dramatic stock fluctuations.

Instead of privatizing our fisheries, we should be working more closely with fishing communities and sustainable, small-scale fishermen to create adaptive management strategies that protect our fish and our fishermen. Smart fishery management can be fair and equitable, maintain public control of the resource, minimize damage to the environment and promote a better life for our nation's fishermen and their communities.

Endnotes

1. Code of Federal Regulations. 50 CFR 600.310 (b)(2)(iii).
2. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) Fisheries Service. "Turning the corner on ending overfishing: U.S. fisheries reaches historic milestone in 2012." 2012.
3. Department of Commerce, NOAA. "50 CFR Part 600, Magnuson-Stevens Act Provisions; Annual Catch Limits; National Standard Guidelines; Final Rule." 74 Federal Register 3178. January 16, 2009 at 3210.
4. Fullenkamp, Lindsay. NOAA Fisheries Service. "Council Coordination Committee Meeting: Budget Issues." January 25, 2012 at 4 and 11.
5. For extensive discussion of catch shares, see: Food & Water Watch. "Fish Inc." June 16, 2011.

For more information:
web: www.foodandwaterwatch.org
email: info@fwwatch.org
phone: (202) 683-2500 (DC) · (415) 293-9900 (CA)