

ENVIRONMENT

Swimming Against Tide of Overfishing

Can one small Mexican lobster co-op's sustainable practices become a model for success?

By William Fulbright Foote

William Fulbright Foote is the director of EcoLogic Enterprise Ventures, Inc., a "green" loan fund based in Cambridge, Mass. that finances small-scale producer organizations in Latin America.

December 29 2002

PUNTA ABREOJOS, Mexico -- Off this pristine beach in Baja California Sur may lie the secret of balance between seafood, which people need to eat, and its environment, which is fast eroding.

The blue waters here are teeming with spiny lobsters and well-tended traps, a testament to the successful efforts of small-scale fishermen who have carved a niche for themselves in the international marketplace while preserving a sensitive environment. The World Wildlife Fund-sponsored Marine Stewardship Council, a global group that certifies sustainable-fishing practices for consumers, is currently reviewing the Baja fishery. If the lobster operation earns the Council's "green" seal of approval next year, it will be the first fishery from a developing country to receive the prized label.

But green seal or no, these are troubled waters. Just a few miles down the beach, and throughout Mexico, overfishing threatens to sink the entire industry. Fish and other seafood -- especially lobster -- have never been in greater demand, with the world's total fishery production today bringing in \$131 billion annually. Since 1960, the world catch has increased more than threefold, from 27 million to more than 91 million tons a year. Fishermen worldwide are harvesting marine life faster than it can replenish itself, causing sharp declines in virtually every commercially important species of fish in the sea. Meanwhile, nearly 25% of what is caught gets tossed back into the ocean either dead or dying.

In Mexico, the situation is particularly bleak, and there is compelling evidence pointing to the Mexican government as the primary culprit for the fishing crisis here. In the early 1990s, the administration of President Carlos Salinas aggressively deregulated Mexican commercial fishing without creating an effective system of permits and licensing.

Boats lack license plates. Motors go unregistered. Virtually anyone, anywhere, can become a commercial fisherman. As a result, the vast majority of Mexico's fisheries, which together make this country the world's sixth-largest global fish producer, now operate under free-for-all conditions. Consider also the years of endemic corruption at the federal, state and local levels, and you can begin to see the scope of the industry's severe economic and environmental crisis.

Take the Gulf of California. "It's complete chaos," says Manuel Gardea, a lobster fisherman and abalone diver turned entrepreneur who helped found a whale-watching company called Ecoturismo Kuyima in the town of

San Ignacio. "It's crawling with [poachers]. You just can't compete."

Luis Bourillon, a marine biologist in Guaymas, posits that 12,000 to 16,000 small-scale fishing boats operate in the Gulf of California, about half without permits. In fiberglass skiffs, they catch 100 species using gill nets, which trap all marine life. Many nations ban them; Mexico does not. Even more indiscriminate are the shrimp fleets, which use bottom-scraping dragnets that catch 10 pounds of other marine creatures for every pound of shrimp. Almost all of the excess is discarded because there is no market for it. Pressured by a powerful commercial fishing lobby, the federal government and its state-owned oil company subsidize marine-diesel fuel costs by 50% to artificially maintain overbuilt, nonviable fleets.

And yet, Punta Abreojos Cooperative stands in stark contrast with the dominant forces that have contributed to the global fishing crisis. Picture an isolated lobster-fishing village on a singularly beautiful and nearly virgin beach at the conjunction of desert terrain and the Pacific coastline. Founded in the 1930s, about 550 miles south of San Diego, the community-based business rigorously respects area closures, restrictions on fishing gear, minimum legal sizes and protection of pregnant females. With 200 members, the co-op undertakes aggressive surveillance and policing of its entire fishing area (radar systems, radio communications, armed night patrols) to stop poachers who overtax the lobster population and harm its fragile marine habitats.

What makes Punta Abreojos different? It holds an exclusive concession to its fishing territory. In the 1930s, the leftist government of President Lázaro Cárdenas allocated exclusive management rights to fishing co-ops along the Pacific coast of Baja California. The government assigned a group of high-value species (lobster, abalone and others) within a restricted fishing territory for each organization.

No one got rich, but geographically isolated communities developed and took care not to over-exploit their precious resources. When necessary, fishermen defended their concessions for economic self-preservation, not necessarily environmental conservation. When fishing legislation changed under Salinas, Punta Abreojos went on the offensive as part of a federation of nine lobster cooperatives in the area.

"We hounded the politicians in Ensenada and Mexico City," recalls Pablo Arce, president of Punta Abreojos Cooperative. "Companeros mobilized and marched. In 1993, we got a new 20-year concession that embodies clear delimitations of our exclusive fishing zone and species access."

Its natural resources relatively secure, Punta Abreojos could then focus its attention where most Mexican fishermen cannot -- on how to compete in a fast-changing international marketplace. Following the example of peasant coffee farmers in southern Mexico, the cooperative decided to market its eco-sensitivity, allowing it to compete in the world marketplace on something other than price.

In Punta Abreojos' case, its fishermen have a comparative advantage in lobster taken in environmentally sensitive ways and thus have the potential to command premium prices. The co-op also happens to lie inside the 6.2-million-acre El Vizcaino Biosphere Reserve, the largest protected natural area in Mexico. U.S. companies such as Whole Foods Market, Royal Caribbean Cruise Lines and Lindblad Expeditions promote and sell eco-labeling programs like that of Marine Stewardship Council, encouraging better fisheries management through market-based incentives. Though the market today for such products is small in North America and Western Europe, its development in coastal areas of Mexico and across Latin America might have major significance for fishermen who otherwise would have to compete in the highly volatile marketplace.

To get there requires productive investment. In December 2002, Punta Abreojos began replacing aged outboard motors with cleaner, more-efficient engines through a pilot credit program established by the organization I direct, EcoLogic Enterprise Ventures, a "green" loan fund based in Cambridge, Mass. A next-generation technology, four-stroke motors are much cleaner and quieter than traditional two-stroke outboard engines. Ubiquitous in Baja, two-strokes dump as much as one-third of their gasoline and oil into the water, while

producing significant air pollution. By contrast, four-strokes use on average 30% to 50% less fuel than two-strokes, yielding immediate monetary savings for fishermen.

Along Mexico's coastlands, these engines could prove an economic boon to cash-strapped fishermen everywhere. As Arce, who signed the loan contracts on behalf of his co-op, explains, "Everybody in the region wants to buy four-strokes. But nobody is going to invest in new motors or in surveillance or environmental protection if they know they cannot keep poachers from stealing their resources."

Poachers, that is, or politicians. In 1995, the Mexican government and Mitsubishi Corp. announced plans to build the world's largest saltworks on the shores of San Ignacio Lagoon, the last pristine winter birthing lagoon for the gray whale. Planned just down the beach from Punta Abreojos, the project's scale threatened the co-op's fishing territory and related livelihood.

Over the next five years, well-known nongovernmental organizations such as the National Resources Defense Council, the International Fund for Animal Welfare, and Earth Island Institute led an international campaign that persuaded then-President Ernesto Zedillo to drop the plans. Their global campaign succeeded, in large measure, by finding traction in the grass-roots organizing of Punta Abreojos. Not coincidentally, those same U.S.-based NGOs are now partially guaranteeing the loans for four-stroke engine purchases.

As Punta Abreojos marries conservation goals with economic rewards, its business model and responsible fisheries management serve as examples for others, both locally and internationally. Out of enlightened self-interest, a stringent conservation ethic has emerged among member fishermen.

Punta Abreojos demonstrates that local fishing communities could be the core constituency in the global battle to save marine biodiversity. There, perhaps, lies at least one secret of balance between fish-for-food and their environment. But until Mexico moves to regulate the free-for-all fishing along most of its coastline, Punta Abreojos is likely to remain impossible to emulate.

If you want other stories on this topic, search the Archives at latimes.com/archives. For information about reprinting this article, go to <http://www.lats.com/rights/>.

**Hurry, the London for FREE sale
ends January 16th!**



Copyright 2003 Los Angeles Times