

In a harsh economic sea, commercial fishermen--aging, hardy, fatalistic--struggle to survive.

FISHING FOR A LIVING OFF NEW JERSEY

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Everyone knows what the oldest profession is. Fishing. It is older than man. Or woman.

Figure it this way. Man evolved from primate orders: One day a monkey spoke, another understood, and man was created. But before monkeys existed, before dinosaurs and proctactyls, before the first venturesome creature crept onto land, everything that lived died in the ocean. And most things that lived there made their living by opening their mouths and going fishing.

It's not so easy for man. Before he can catch a fish, an anachronistic process must be invented for him. Fishermen today use radios and depth charts, depth meters and fish scopes, but the basic elements of their art remain: a sea, a man, a boat, a net (or a hook, or a harpoon), and, somewhere, a fish. These are the rules, and they have not changed for thousands of years.

Men who live and work by these rules are scattered on a 50-mile radius from Philadelphia--in inlets, bays, and harbors along the northern New Jersey coast. Half a mile from the beaches and the Ferris wheels and the Drive-In Hamburger joints are scattered half a dozen dock areas that send fresh fish to Philadelphia, Baltimore and New York.

Some docks are old and healthy, others are rotting and dying, but the state of the industry is best described by the scene at one of them: Ben's Harbor in Wildwood.

There, behind the 30-odd boats that were built to trawl for fish and now dredge for oysters because that's what's left, behind the wooden dock that has rotted under foot and collapsed overhead, looms the huge rusted hull of a fishing boat that was begun and never finished.

The lines of the boat are clean and sleek, and promise to guide easily through water. But today it sits helplessly grounded, awkward and anomalous among the cars and trucks that come and park beside it and then shift away in jerky, graceless spurts, the way motor boats move on the ocean.

Those that work in its shadow--the men who clam or pack clams or cut fillets out of fish sent down from Massachusetts--ignore this most pristine of vessels, this wreck untouched by seawater. But they all understand its unfulfilled promise. They know it is a monument to the times. It is as if the God of fishermen had commanded Noah to build, and Noah had begun, and picked his way slowly along the pier, avoiding the holes, and hopped into the pretty, vinyl-blue tourist vessel that floats at the end of the harbor, next to the sidewalk along Park Boulevard; as if Noah had chatted with the other tourists, eaten popcorn and hot dogs and sipped gin, and then gone out for a spin on the waters.

Fishing is a dilapidated, retarded industry in New Jersey, and it needs a flood. If the vast cleansing waters do not descend, if there is no new world created, the present industry will splinter and rot until nothing remains--not docks, boats, fish or fishermen.

The decline in available fish has been appalling. John Shaw, a lobster pot fisherman from Atlantic City, recalls that in the old days "the problem wasn't catching fish; it was selling them. We caught too many." Today the situation is reversed. All edible fish are sold, and rising prices help to compensate for diminished fish stocks. But the time may come, regardless of price, when there is nothing left to sell.

Last year New Jersey fishermen landed 126 million pounds of fish, slightly more than

their fathers and grandfathers caught in 1901. But last year more than half the fish landed were inedible--caught for industrial use. The 1901 catch, made with the most rudimentary equipment, included at least 12 million more pounds of edible fish than the 1968 catch.

So it goes. The New Jersey fishery reached its peak level, 540 million pounds, in 1956. But almost 90 percent of that catch was menhaden, a fish caught for processing into such products as animal feed, lipstick and linoleum. By 1956, most edible fish were becoming scarce.

That trend has become precipitous in the past seven years, following the heavy storm of 1962. Since then virtually every species of finfish, including menhaden, has declined drastically. Porgy and fluke (a kind of flounder), which have been the mainstays of the local industry for the past decade, are being caught at less than a third of their former levels. Only higher prices and an increase in available shellfish--lobsters, surf clams and scallops--have allowed the industry to survive.

Fishermen regard the depletion of the seas with alternating moods of indignation ("Why doesn't the government help? It pays the farmers not to plant, but it doesn't pay us not to fish.") and equanimity ("It's a fading life like anything else.") Fishermen accept whatever fish come into their nets, whatever money comes to their pockets. The sea, the work, is always there, beckoning; and it's like a boxer missing his opponent, it's just as much work to catch nothing. Besides, as one dock owner says, "Many fishermen think like I do. Fishing may be dead here in 20 years--but so will I."

As docks are old, as boats are old (more afloat today were built before 1925 than since 1960) so are the fishermen. They look like the backbone of the Social Security system, these old men of the sea, and they walk on land with the easy rocking rhythm of the water. They will haul in a net on the day they die; and those that won't, the ones who come ashore first, do not retire to their homes and wives; you see them packing fish on the dock or running the pulley that unloads the catch. When they get too old for that, they stand and watch. They say it gets in your blood.

Most have had it in their blood all their lives. They started fishing because they went

to sea in the Navy and liked it, or because they lived in the neighborhood and watched or because their fathers handed them a net and said to swab the deck.

They've fished ever since. It shows in their clear blue eyes, the skin thick and wrinkled like a turtle's, the testy sinuous strength that gives a man of 60 the vigor of someone 30 years younger.

It shows too in their language, which is rough, and in their use of it, which is simple and direct. A fish can't be sweet-talked or hustled. You can swear at him if you want to make yourself feel better, but there's no use lying or prevaricating. The only truth a fish understands is your net.

The truths of fish and net are primitive ones without a visible financial future. They have nothing to do with tax benefits or stock transfers, with health insurance or early retirement plans. It is not hard to see why most "younger" fishermen turn out to be 40 and why young men who used to go to sea today go to college. A few still move from the Navy to the fishing boats, but there is a shortage of men on the docks, and sometimes a captain has to wait a week to gather a crew. The eager boys from the neighborhood are gone, and today when a captain takes his son on board, he hopes the boy will get seasick and sea-weary. Only in small towns like Wildwood does the old familiar pattern hold true. There you can still see a 12-year-old boy scrubbing the deck after the boats come in. You ask him about the day's catch and he frowns: "I don't know. Ask my father; he's the captain."

But even most old-timers say they wouldn't go into the business today. And then they glance toward the water, shrug, and smile--as if to say that it's not a business, it's a way of life, and they're glad they had the chance to live it.

As much as the financial prospects, the way of life may discourage younger men. Sig Hansen, a big ruddy Norwegian who worked at sea for 52 years and now manages a fishing cooperative at Point Pleasant, says "Some young men still come and say they want to go fishing, but one trip out and you don't see them any more. They get seasick. Besides, the younger generation wants to sleep."

A fisherman does his sleeping on shore. As soon as his boat leaves land, he tows his net 24 hours a day as long as he's out there--three to ten days. At night he tries to sneak three or four hours sleep while one of the boats is in the water--and while the rest of the crew checks the last tow for "trash," fish that can't be sold and have to be thrown back.

Of course not all fishermen go out for a week at a time. Most clam dredgers work on "day boats" that come in every night, but they stay out for 13 hours--from four in the morning until five in the afternoon.

Nobody says the life is easy. They say it's strenuous. They say it's hazardous, too, both physically and financially. Every time that you run the risk of being rammed at night by a larger vessel, or being caught in rough seas that may throw a man overboard or sink a boat. Seven boats from southern New Jersey were lost in the 1962 storm.

As if these worries weren't enough, you never know when you may snag your net and lose both (value--\$1000). Or when your technical equipment may break down and send you home early. Or when you'll have a "broker," a trip that doesn't pay for supplies. And when you come home with a boat full of fish, sure of your fortune, you may find that the price has dropped from 30 cents a pound to 10.

For all the uncertainty, fishermen still make what they call, simply, "a living." In a very good year a captain can clear around \$18,000, and a member of his crew about half that. But the rewards, the fishermen say, are largely intangible--the beauty of the sea in the summer, three months out of 12; the sense that each trip is a mystery, a bout with fortune; and the firm self-respect that comes from working for yourself (every crew member gets a percentage) and yet being part of a crew.

Fishermen are among the last of the hardy, independent Americans--the last frontiersmen. The captain of a boat in Atlantic City explains: "You take a guy on my crew and put him behind a desk, and nine times out of ten he'll get fired. When he's out there he doesn't have to punch a clock, to get here at nine and leave there at five. He's working for himself. He's more his own boss. Of course, the skipper makes the decisions, but he consults the crew. And everybody on

board knows that the better the gear is, the more fish he'll catch and the more money he'll make."

The interdependence of a fishing crew acts as a powerful communal force. It molds the men into a unit that has much of the cohesion and the spirit of a Navy boot camp or a high school locker room. The men rage each other with the same raucous enthusiasm:

"Look sharp? You couldn't look sharp if you had your face lifted. I feel good because as long as you're alive I know I'm not the ugliest guy in the world."

And out on the water the communal feeling increases; it extends beyond the limits of any single boat. Fishermen lend each other equipment, assistance, and advice on where to fish. If you need something, it's a long way--often a hundred miles--back to shore.

This spirit even encompasses the foreign boats that have moved into our coastal waters during the past ten years. Much has been written about resentment toward these boats, especially toward the most numerous ones, the Russian trawlers. But the fishermen themselves--American or Soviet--are more likely to wave than to curse at each other. Our fishermen say, "They're trying to make a living just like we are. They're catching fish to feed people."

At times the Russian boats also have been blamed for the decline in available fish, so much so that an agreement recently was reached which prevents Soviet vessels from fishing for the most valuable edible finfish.

But the Soviets made the agreement because they weren't interested in these fish. They knew that such species were on the decline, and they brought their large vessels here to fish for plentiful varieties, like herring and hake, that can't be sold in this country. Russian boats may be retarding the recovery of the best species, but they are not responsible for the present depletion.

Probably no single factor is responsible, but every man in the business looks for a primary cause. This is the ten-million-dollar question--the industry's present value; and every man comes up with his own answer. Vernon Rise, manager of a menhaden plant in Wildwood, said, "The decline started in 1963, right after the big storm. I still say

that had something to do with it. The storm changed the bottom out there."

Sig Hansen, Point Pleasant fisherman: "I lay it to overfishing. We've been doing it for 20 years. The Russians will leave soon. You can bet they won't come 4000 miles for nothing."

Warren Lund, former fisherman, now a Cape May dock owner: "Fishing's not dying out. It's changing like any other small business. Fish protect themselves. When they start getting caught, they move. The porgies and the fluke are leaving, so we'll have to create a demand for something else. Like mackerel. We have more mackerel now than I've ever seen."

Alfred Jones, Atlantic City dock owner: "We're killing all the young. The government should pass laws requiring a certain mesh size on the nets and prohibiting sale of anything smaller. What would happen to human population if we destroyed all the young males?"

"Captain Jack" Lawson, itinerant fisherman: "You used to be able to get croakers all day long--now they're down off Mississippi. We're catching scallops here that used to be off Nantucket, and they're getting Boston mackerel in the Chesapeake Bay. Either the water's getting colder or the equator's moved."

The government laboratory in Woods Hole, Mass., reports that ocean temperatures have been dropping for 15 years, but they say the trend may have stopped. The cooler waters here account for the increase in available shellfish.

If New Jersey alone were registering declines, some local cause (foreign boats, the storm, colder waters) might be held accountable. But decreasing fish stocks is a national problem. The United States now supplies less than a fourth of the fish she consumes. Once second in the world in total poundage, she is now sixth.

So as our primary cause we must look for a national problem, and the one explanation most often cited by fishermen is that ubiquitous and invisible destroyer, pollution--industrial, detergent, human, and agricultural (pesticide) pollution.

Captain Dave Hart, who had his own commercial boat for 18 years and now works for various government agencies, documents a persuasive case against pollution: "The species that don't use the inland estuaries for spawning--herring, hake, whiting--all seem to be in good shape. The porgies, the fluke, the sea bass, all the ones that use the estuaries, are declining. Of course there has to be an exception: Striped bass spawn in the estuaries and they're more abundant than ever. But the overwhelming patterns point to some sort of pollution."

A possible solution to this problem comes from Harry McGarrigel, dean of the Atlantic City dock. ("Me and my father before me. We've been on the street since 1911.") Harry is a heavy, friendly man. As he sorts fish on his dock he looks like the owner of a New York delicatessen, but his friends note with pride that he went to Washington to help negotiate the treaty with the Russians. Harry McGarrigel says, "All we need is \$35 million dollars to pipe all that waste out to sea and then things will be straightened out, after about ten years. It'll take that long for the water to clear up."

However long it would take for the waters to clear--and ten years probably is an extreme prognosis--the fishermen need someone to begin the process. That someone probably will have to be the Federal Government. States take little interest in fishing--they don't even collect statistics, and what interest they do take varies. New Jersey has a law poorly enforced, prohibiting sale of small fish; most Southern States have no such statute.

Compared to other nations, even our Federal Government pays negligible attention to its fishery. Foreign countries build and man enormous fleets complete with the most modern equipment; our country authorizes Small Business loans. Besides the loans, the U.S. Bureau of Commercial Fisheries confines its activities to periodical bulletins on fish sightings and prices, and to research. Thus far the predominant product of the research has been expensive new equipment that small fishing boats cannot afford. But recently the government has been developing a new product that may help revitalize the industry.

Fish Protein Concentrate (FPC) is an odorless, tasteless fish flour made by

reducing six pounds of whole fish into a pound of fine powder. Because FPC converts the whole fish, it retains every one of the 30 odd amino acids that are the main components of protein. The result is a product that is 75 percent protein--and that could do much toward relieving under-nourishment throughout the world.

Other countries, like Norway and Sweden, already have begun to produce FPC. The United States is now building its first plant. Although the Food and Drug Administration has approved only hake-like species for the pilot project, all signs indicate that it will soon approve all species.

If so, this would mean that the great mass of trash (sea robins, dogfish, sharks) as well as the abundant species the Russians are catching (herring, hake, mackerel) could be harvested. The boats that would go for such fish would have to be enormous company vessels, too large to be owned by the captain, too expensive and mechanized to hunt for fish in the old, romantic and desultory fashion. The men who worked these boats would live something like today's clambers or menhaden fishermen. Their work would be more routine, more like drudgery and less like sport, than the life of today's finfishermen. The sea is full of trash.

But there is a possibility that the small boats may linger on. Captain Dave Hart from Cape May explains, "Up to now we've done our damndest to destroy the natural ecology of the sea. We've taken the good fish and let the weeds flourish. If we start to fish for trash we may restore the natural balance."

He goes on to describe what may happen then: "If the finfish do come back, they may do so very suddenly. Fish can reproduce like insects. Scientists opened up one striped bass and found three million eggs."

If the finfish return in vast numbers, large vessels probably will be constructed to fish for them. Such boats already operate out of enormous fishing ports like New Bedford,

Mass. If comparable boats come to New Jersey, then the small independent boats, like the local grocery store, will die out. But if the valuable finfish increase in limited numbers, if catching them remains an uncertain and speculative venture, construction of larger boats would be too risky. Then the small boats might survive.

No one can be certain what will happen. It seems that fishing's future is largely in the hands of the Federal Government. If it demonstrates that FPC is a feasible product, it may help create a new industry. But the real problem probably is the estuaries. The government must weigh America's traditional agricultural-industrial perspective--the one that ultimately leads to contaminated estuaries--against a future in which man may have to depend on his marine resources for food.

But the sea is a mystery. Next year, the year after, the fish may return. They've done it before. "Captain Jack" Lawson says, "Anyone who thinks he knows anything about the sea is a damn fool." The fishermen have a saying to express this. Ask one of them anything about fish and he'll answer, as often as not, with a shrug--and then he'll add: "They have tails, and they swim."

But every fisherman changes the expression a little to suit his personality. "Captain Jack" is 67 years old, a lithe, spunky little Virginian who speaks with a Boston twang from fishing there for many years. He says, "Fishing's deteriorating just as fast as you can push it down the hill. Don't ask me why. They have fins and tails; they go where nobody knows."

Will the fisherman go, too? Probably in one guise or another, he will remain. The captain of a boat in Atlantic City says: "Today I'm a bum because I make a living from the sea. People hear I'm a commercial fisherman and they turn up their noses. They're snobs. Some day--I may not live to see it--the man of the sea will be respected. He'll provide the food that the world will subsist on."

