ARTICLES

A TRAWLER'S VOYAGE POINTS UP U.S. FISHERMEN'S PROBLEMS

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HAMPTON, VA.--Old and weather-beaten, the trawler 'Dragnet' slips almost unnoticed into this fishing port. Despite five tough days at sea, the crew of this 35-ton boat shows no elation at the sight of land. For the trip, in the argot of ocean-going fishermen, was nearly a "broker." There was barely enough money made to cover expenses, leaving little for the crew.

The problems were many: Too much time spent chasing too few fish. Mechanical mishaps. Bad weather that cut short the voyage. And, most depressing of all, an unexpected sharp drop in the price of flounder--for which the men were fishing eight miles off the Virginia coast.

"Many more trips like this one and we'll be out of business," grumbles Capt. James Callis, the pipe-smoking, 47-year-old skipper and part-owner of the Dragnet.

"Captain Jimmy" and his two hands aboard the Dragnet aren't alone in their troubles. Indeed, unproductive trips like this one are becoming all too familiar for many American deep-sea fishermen. For one thing, once-prolific species are dwindling. North Atlantic waters no longer yield the rich catches of cod, haddock and ocean perch of just a few years ago. Farther south, catches of porgy, sea bass and flounder have slumped. In Pacific Northwest waters, halibut and king crab are in short supply. The result: America's total fish catch last year was the second smallest since 1942.

FOREIGN RIVALS

Fishermen blame their woes on Russian ships and other foreign fleets that increasingly work waters near the American 12-mile limit. The problem may worsen. Two weeks ago a foreign fleet of more than 300 boats, at least 200 of them flying the Soviet flag, was reported sweeping the New England coast.

Of course, by no means are all species on the decline. The 1968 shrimp catch set a record, and the tuna catch, while down, remained at a high level. Still, concern is heightening over the plight of the U.S. fishing industry, which pulled in $472 million worth of fish in 1968. "Large portions of the industry are in deep trouble," says Lee J. Weddig, executive director of the National Fisheries Institute Inc., a trade group. "The catch is declining, equipment is lagging and there are few, if any, profits."

Much of the American fishing fleet is old, inefficient and unable to compete with the large, modern craft in foreign fleets, which are capable of operating thousands of miles from home ports. There are, to be sure, exceptions; at least 350 new vessels joined the U.S. shrimp fleet last year. But noting that 60% of America's boats are over 16 years old, a Bureau of Commercial Fisheries report states flatly: "Most of the U.S. fleet is obsolete."

RUGGED INDIVIDUALISTS

What's more, foreign boats, often subsidized by their governments, are geared to cooperate in their expeditions. The large Russian fleets regularly send out scout boats that search for schools of fish. American captains, however, tend to be small businessmen who view each other as competitors. Crusty and independent, they aren't inclined to cooperate. And like many small businessmen, they're also plagued by rising costs, especially for labor and insurance.

Whatever the reasons, the U.S. is rapidly losing its place as a world fishing leader. The U.S. share of the total world catch of fish has dropped to 5% from 13% in 1956, thereby moving the nation to sixth from second place (Peru is first). And while America's annual production has varied little since 1945, the world catch of fish has increased more than threefold. The U.S. now imports nearly three-fourths of the fish it consumes.

A Congressional committee that studied the predicament of the fishing industry

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recently commented that "vessels generally become much less economical to operate by the time they are 15 years old." A case in point is the 31-year-old Dragnet, whose mechanical woes add considerably to expenses. "Something is always falling apart," sighs Capt. Callis, a slightly built, unflappable man who has skippered the boat for 15 years.

CATCHING AN ANCHOR

A few days aboard the 65-foot trawler illustrate what the captain means. The first day out the boat's nets were badly shredded when she snagged an old ship's anchor. It took the captain and his two-man crew three hours to disentangle the anchor and repair the net, a delay that cost the men at least one net-load of fish. On the second day, a vital link holding the net to a cable snapped loose, permitting the net to dangle freely in the water. It took an hour to fix and probably cost another haul. (Actually, the boat got off easy this trip; a few months ago she had to be towed home when a propeller was damaged.)

Finally, the weather--a constant worry to fishermen--forced the Dragnet to shorten her trip by two days. But it's unlikely that the extra days at sea would have greatly improved the Dragnet's fortunes. For while the fishing wasn't disastrous, it was mediocre. "I'm not so much disappointed as bored," muttered the captain as he bent over the wheel on the second day. "Ten years ago you could catch twice the fish in half the time."

Capt. Callis and his crew work 14 hours a day, from first light at 5 a.m. to 9 p.m. How do they spend the late evening hours? They fish--this time for themselves, dangling lines over the boat's side. Usually they have even worse luck than during the day: On this trip they caught nothing in two nights of trying. "We just like to fish," said deck hand Garland Smith, baiting a hook with a piece of raw fish.

During the day, the trawler usually has time for seven hauls--assuming nothing breaks down--as she cruises back and forth off the Virginia coast. The nets cut a 60-foot swath along the ocean floor; after covering about two miles, they're hauled in with winches. Each haul yields roughly 70 to 150 pounds of fish.

All told, the Dragnet must haul in about 4,500 pounds of flounder on each trip for the captain and crew to make a modest profit. This is based on prices to the fishermen ranging between 30 and 60 cents a pound, depending on the size of the fish. But on this trip, the catch was only 3,000 pounds, and prices--for reasons that still aren't clear to Capt. Callis--slumped to an average of 27 cents a pound. (The wholesaler who bought the Dragnet's load claims prices always drop after the summer.)

"That was a real blow," says the skipper, noting the boat grossed only about $800 for the five-day effort. The amount was so small it couldn't be divided up in the usual manner, which calls for 40% to be set aside for boat upkeep, 10% to go to the captain and his fellow owners, about $350 to defray expenses and the rest to go to the crew (which again includes the captain). Almost nothing would have been left for the crew had the captain followed this formula, so he juggled expenses so that each man got $100 for about 70 hours work.

Capt. Callis concedes this is low pay, but he has troubles of his own. For the owners to break even each year, he has to gross a minimum of $50,000. This isn't always easy. Last year, for example, the Dragnet's 13-year-old engine broke down, idling the boat for three months. As a result, the captain showed a slight loss for the year. Despite declining catches, it's still possible to make a profit most years because the prices of many dwindling species have doubled or better over the last five years, the skipper says.

Even so, the skipper finds himself caught in a profit squeeze. Higher prices may enable him to gross about what he could when fish were more abundant, but the increases in costs cut profits. For one thing, insurance for his boat and crew now costs him $6,200 annually, up from about $3,000 ten years ago. The costs of fuel, ice, nets, cable and other equipment are also rising.

While he can survive for the moment, the captain worries about the future. "Prices have gone about as high as they can go," he maintains. "So if the fish keep declining, I don't know what's going to happen."

PROPOSALS FOR CURES

Government and industry sources believe Capt. Callis' troubles are typical (the 35-ton

Dragnet may seem small, but only 13,000 of the country's 84,200 commercial fishing boats weigh five tons or more). Lately, dozens of proposals have been advanced for revitalizing the fishing industry. Early this year the President's Commission on Marine Sciences, Engineering and Resources recommended, among other things, that the U.S. develop a "technically advanced fishing fleet" and also reduce "excess fishing effort" in order to replenish depleted species.

One cost problem affecting U.S. fishermen stems from a 1793 law requiring that vessels landing fish in U.S. ports be built in this country. Construction costs in the U.S. are about double those elsewhere. A bill to end the restriction has been introduced in the Senate, but it is given little chance of passage.

In 1964, Congress did pass a law granting subsidies covering up to 50% of the cost of new boats built in the U.S. The law expired in June, and a bill to renew it has been passed by the House and is pending in the Senate. But funds for the subsidies have been scarce, and so far only 32 new boats have been built under the program.

Department of Interior officials say they have been somewhat more successful in efforts to ease pressure on over-fished species. A spokesman notes that in 1967 the Russians agreed to refrain from fishing for flounder, porgy and a few other species found to be declining near U.S. shores. Officials say the program is working, but some fishermen claim the Russians frequently ignore the agreement.

Capt. Callis says that early this year his trawler passed within 100 yards of a Russian fishing boat hauling in large amounts of porgy. He says he complained to the Bureau of Commercial Fisheries but found the agency skeptical. "They asked if I could prove the fish were porgy," recalls the captain. "Hell, I've been chasing porgy all my life, I ought to know what they look like."

The captain claims that during the same trip a Russian boat veered towards the Dragnet and nearly rammed it. The incident was reported to the State Department, but nothing came of it, he says. "A lot of those Russian boats just want to hog the bottom--and since they're bigger than we are, there isn't much we can do about it," he grumbles.

The large Russian, Japanese and other foreign fleets that work off American coasts are equipped to haul in many more fish than U.S. boats. For instance, Russian trawlers, which range up to 423 feet in size, are large enough to pull two sets of nets--one dragging the bottom and one dragging at middle depths. This technique enables them to double their catch.

"The Dragnet simply doesn't have the power to pull more than one set of nets," says Capt. Callis. Fishermen also complain that the Russians use a much finer net, which permits them to fish for a number of species simultaneously. (American boats generally fish for just one species at a time.) The Russian trawlers periodically transfer their catches to large mother ships that process, can and refrigerate the fish while still at sea.

A LOW-PRESSURE LIFE

Despite the industry's troubles, most fishermen are reluctant to leave their jobs, although there have been some departures. Nationally, the number of commercial fishermen declined to 136,500 in 1967 from 161,463 in 1950. Only about 45 trawlers now operate out of Hampton, compared with about 100 ten years ago, according to one study.

Captains complain that young people are rejecting the fishing life for softer land-based jobs. But some fishermen say the low-pressure life at sea has its compensations.

"Out here you're your own boss--there aren't all kinds of people standing over you," says deck hand Smith of the Dragnet. Still, he concedes his income is unimpressive. The two Dragnet deck hands say they gross $4,000 to $5,000 a year. They get no overtime pay, no paid vacations and few other fringe benefits.

Nor does the Dragnet offer her crew much in the way of amenities. The only fresh water comes from a small, hand-operated pump in the bow. Hence, everyone foregoes bathing, tooth-brushing and other niceties during what is ordinarily a seven-day trip. The captain and crew sleep in cramped quarters in the bow or in the engine room, which is hot and reeks with diesel fumes. (Indeed, a passenger found his engine room bunk so intolerable he ended up sleeping on the floor of the pilothouse.)

Food on the Dragnet, however, is good and hearty. Mulligan stew, pork chops, hot dogs and beans--and occasionally fish--are standard fare concocted by deck hand Eugene White, 44, who doubles as cook.