

# Greenwashing Our Fisheries: Catch Share Programs Do Not Save Our Fish

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Catch shares are a system for managing our nation's fisheries that are causing consolidation in the fishing industry at the expense of the livelihoods of thousands of smaller-scale, traditional fishermen and their communities.<sup>1</sup> Such programs are being heavily touted as a means to promote sustainable fishing, but a closer look reveals they do not have a positive environmental record. Catch shares can incentivize the use of larger-scale boats, more damaging gear and wasteful fishing practices that hurt fish populations and the habitats on which they depend.

## Misplaced faith in catch shares

Catch shares divide the total amount of fish that can be caught in a year – called a total allowable catch, or TAC – into smaller portions, or quota. These are then given to fishermen and can be leased, bought and sold.<sup>2</sup>

Despite the fact that TACs (which set sustainable fishing limits) are the key strategy for conserving fish populations,<sup>3</sup> catch shares (which only distribute portions of that limit) are being promoted by federal government agencies as the best way to maintain fishery health<sup>4</sup>. However, there are many ways to successfully implement a TAC-controlled fishery,<sup>5</sup> and the National Research Council concluded that much of the political support for catch shares is “driven by faith in the assumption that privatization will foster ecological sensibility.”<sup>6</sup>

In fact, most catch share programs have been put into place in fisheries where TACs are already preventing overfishing (which occurs when fish populations are depleted to the point that they can't sustain themselves).<sup>7</sup> One widely cited study claiming that catch share programs can prevent wide-scale fisheries collapse<sup>8</sup> failed to determine if improvements in fishery health were actually due to catch shares, rather than simply TAC enforcement.<sup>9</sup> Another study shows that the results of fish conservation vary widely between fifteen North American catch share fisheries and concludes that catch share management did not ensure ecological sustainability.<sup>10</sup>

Fish populations under some of the oldest catch share systems in the world are still overfished. In New Zealand, the percentage of assessed fish populations not meeting

desired sustainability levels increased from 15 percent to more than 30 percent between 2006 and 2010.<sup>11</sup> In another example, Norway's cod fish populations dropped to their lowest levels ever in 2006 after years of catch shares management.<sup>12</sup>

## Fewer boats doesn't mean less damaging boats or less fishing

In a catch share fishery, the same total number of fish will be caught regardless of how the quota is distributed, but the transferability of catch shares allows the control of the fishery to consolidate in the hands of a fewer, larger fishing operations.<sup>13</sup>

Quota has traditionally been distributed to fishermen based on how much they have caught in the past. This may reward those that fish as hard and fast as possible, using gear associated with ecological damage.<sup>14</sup> For example, corporate-run industrial-scale “factory fish” boats frequently use equipment that can catch large amounts of fish quickly, but can also damage the ocean floor and kill other wildlife unnecessarily in the process.<sup>15</sup>

## Catch shares clash with ecosystem-friendly fishing

New research focusing on the implementation of the New England groundfish catch share program suggests that the catch shares program has replaced the traditional fishing community focus on diverse and adaptive fishing strategies that consider habitat, migratory patterns and fishing gear.<sup>16</sup> So, rather than increasing fishermen's personal investment in the fishery and encouraging cooperation to spur long-

term sustainable management, the program has motivated fishermen to attain short-term goals such as maximizing their quota usage and raising the value of their quota share.<sup>17</sup>

## Catch shares contain incentives to discard fish

In many cases, fish populations continue to decline because the very design of most catch shares programs includes incentives to discard fish.<sup>18</sup> By limiting how much fish that fishermen can catch and making it too difficult to acquire additional quota, fishermen may discard smaller fish that will bring in less profit at the dock.<sup>19</sup> This process, called “high-grading,” can result in the death of many fish, which are tossed overboard, depleting fish populations while yielding no profit for fishermen.<sup>20</sup> Similarly, “bycatch” — ocean wildlife that is unwanted or illegally caught while fishing other species — is also discarded and has prevented fisheries from recovering from overfishing.<sup>21</sup>

Discarding and high-grading have been described as “an almost inevitable outcome of quota-managed fisheries,”<sup>22</sup> and catch shares typically increases incentives to do both, particularly in fisheries with fishermen that catch many species of fish simultaneously.<sup>23</sup> Low-impact fishing with lower bycatch and reduced high-grading could be promoted through effective fisheries management,<sup>24</sup> but the reverse is currently happening: larger-scale boats that are less selective in how they fish are becoming dominant in the catch share fisheries around the world.



## Catch share programs aren't “green”

Catch share programs are not environmental protection measures. A close look at the environmental claims of proponents reveals that catch shares are not the solution to managing our ocean ecosystems sustainably. Given the devastating economic effect these programs have on coastal communities and fishermen, the United States cannot afford to pursue catch shares under the guise of environmental sustainability.

For more information on catch share programs, please visit our website, [www.foodandwaterwatch.org/fish/fairfish/](http://www.foodandwaterwatch.org/fish/fairfish/).

## Endnotes

- 1 For a full discussion of the economic effects of catch share programs, please see our report: Food & Water Watch. Fish, Inc.: The privatization of U.S. fisheries through catch share programs. 2011.
- 2 National Research Council. Committee to Review Individual Fishing Quotas. “Sharing the fish: Toward a national policy on individual fishing quotas.” National Academy Press. Washington, DC. 1999 at 1-3 and 20.
- 3 Ibid. at 105.
- 4 National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. NOAA Catch Share Policy. November 2010 at i-ii; National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. “NOAA policy encourages catch shares to end overfishing and rebuild fisheries.” Press release. Nov 4, 2010.
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- 9 Levy, Sharon. “Catch shares management.” *BioScience*. Vol. 60 No. 10. November 2010 at 782.
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- 15 Committee on Ecosystem Effects of Fishing: Phase 1 -- Effects of Bottom Trawling on Seafloor Habitats, National Research Council. “Effects of trawling and dredging on seafloor habitat.” 2002 at 2, 15, and chapter 3.
- 16 Brewer, Jennifer F. “Paper fish and policy conflict: Catch shares and ecosystem-based management in Maine’s groundfishery.” *Ecology and Society*. 16(1):15. 2011.
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 Bremner, Graeme et al. “Unreported bycatch in the New Zealand west coast South Island hoki fishery.” *Marine Policy*. 33. 2009 at 504.
- 19 Ibid.; Gibbs, Mark T. Op. cit. 13 at 24.
- 20 National Research Council. Op. cit. 2 at 36, 175, and 272; Kristofersson, Dadi and Rickertsen, Kyrre. “Highgrading in quota-regulated fisheries: Evidence from the Icelandic cod fishery.” *The American Journal of Agricultural Economics*. Vol 91, Iss 2. May 2009 at 335.
- 21 Harrington, Jennie M. et al. “Wasted fishery resources: discarded by-catch in the USA.” *Fish and Fisheries*. Vol 6, 350-361. 2005 at 351.
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- 23 Bremner, Graeme, et al. Op. cit. 18 at 504.
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