Individual Fishing Quotas: A Win-Win Tool for Fisheries and Fishermen

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Among the many critical threats facing our oceans today is the overfishing of U.S. waters. In recent years, commercial fleets have grown larger, fishing gear has become increasingly sophisticated and more efficient, and sport fishing has soared in popularity. Our fishery management system has not kept pace with these changes, often allowing catches that exceed the ability of the fish to replenish themselves. Environmental Defense marine ecologist Dr. Rod Fujita has been instrumental in developing and advocating Individual Fishing Quotas, an innovative management tool that allows fish populations to prosper while benefiting fishermen.

Q: What are Individual Fishing Quotas (IFQs) exactly?

Individual fishing quotas are really privileges that are granted to fishermen to catch a certain percentage of the "allowable catch." The "allowable catch" is a scientifically defined number or poundage of fish that can be extracted from a fish population sustainably; fishery managers divide that amount into percentage shares and allocate those shares initially to a group of fishermen they deem to be qualified to receive them.

Q: What criteria are used to divvy up the "pie"?

Qualification can be based on any number of criteria, but more often than not shares are allocated on the basis of how many fish a fishermen has caught in the past, so the amount of fish one has caught in the past is your allocation share. That's not particularly desirable or fair because it tends to reward the big guys and shut out the small guys. Environmental Defense has been advocating for some national guidelines that would result in a more equitable distribution of that initial share.

Q: What are some of the advantages of IFQs?

One key feature of most IFQ programs is that shares can be transferred or traded. That transferability creates a mechanism for reducing the number of fishing vessels or fishermen involved in a fishery, which often is a problem: there are just too many boats chasing too few fish. IFQs are really good at reducing the number of vessels in a fishery in a rational way and an industry-financed way, as opposed to a government buyout or just the collapse of the fishery. For example, instead of just going bankrupt as a fish population crashes, fishermen who want to get out of commercial fishing can sell their shares, allowing other fishermen to expand their operations. Others who have large vessels that are not being used to full capacity because of reductions in the allowable catch can consolidate their operations.

Q: Does every fishery have an allowable catch limit now?
Not all fisheries have a cap on them, but many do. If a fishery doesn't have an allowable catch limit, it can't use IFQs, and for some species it doesn't make much sense to have individual fishing quotas. So IFQs would be appropriate only for certain fisheries.

Q: Besides covering specific fisheries, can IFQs cover an entire region?

That is a point of controversy. Ideally, if you are going to implement an IFQ system, you want it to be comprehensive because certain problems can result if you do only one species at a time. One problem with doing IFQs for only one species in a given area is that if there are too many fishing boats out there, those boats will probably just go fish harder for other species not covered by IFQs. For instance, if fishermen have the flexibility to go after halibut over a long season, they might go fish for cod in the meantime and get as much of that as fast as they can. A good example of an IFQ covering multiple (46) species is New Zealand. The top ten IFQ species in New Zealand are green shell mussel, hake, hoki, ling, orange roughy, paua, rock lobster, salmon, snapper and squid.

Q: Why has the system of hard limits on the number of fish that may be caught in a given system (allowable catch for a fishery) not worked?

It has only increased the fierce competition among fishermen for those limited fish, creating a free-for-all or a derby mentality, especially when the fishing time is shortened further because a fishery is beginning to collapse. Fishermen then start pushing for unsustainable catches because so many fishermen are competing.

Q: Besides depleting a fishery, what are some of the other problems with this derby mentality of trying to go out and catch as many fish in as short a time as possible?

For one, fishermen are just not as careful as they would be otherwise. One of the problems is that if a crew's gear (like trawls and long-lines) gets tangled up, the crew is often in such a hurry that they just cut it and run, and the gear just sits there in the water, killing fish year after year -- a process called *ghost fishing*. Another problem is that they may not be as careful to select an area that has lower bycatch rates. Fish sometimes group together, so if fishermen are focusing on one target species they may haul up a whole bunch of other species just by accident, as opposed to having more time to scope out different areas, do test fishing and find places where bycatch would be low. Obviously if you only have 48 hours to fish (as was the case with the halibut fishery in Alaska prior to IFQ management), you are going to just go out and catch whatever fish you can and throw overboard whatever harvested fish you don't need. Then there is the safety issue: When fishermen are staying up all night in sometimes dangerous weather conditions, there are more injuries and deaths.

Q: What are some examples of successful IFQ programs?

In Alaska, the fishery season for halibut was expanded from a 2-day season to a nine-month season. This change had very dramatic results with fishermen having the flexibility to choose when they would fish, rather than feeling forced to get out there no matter what. So safety has improved, for one. Also, a short season of only a few days or a week resulted in a huge glut of a particular fish on the market -- you can only sell so much, so a lot has to be frozen, and there is much less fresh fish on the market. And since frozen fish commands a lower price, fishermen
earn less. On the other hand, with IFQs, fishermen's profits tend to increase quite dramatically. Also, ghost fishing went way down as well as bycatch rates.

One thing that has intrigued us as conservationists is that the allowable catch limits had routinely been exceeded prior to the implementation of IFQs simply because of the difficulty in figuring out how many fish were being caught when they were being caught that fast. When the season is so fast and furious, fishery managers have little chance of knowing when the limit is being approached so they can halt fishing for the season. But with the IFQ system in place, the main conservation result (besides reducing bycatch) was that the allowable catch limit was adhered to very, very well.

Q: And has Pacific halibut in Alaska recovered since then?

Yes, it's in pretty good shape biologically, and so is sablefish, the other fishery in Alaska that is under IFQ control.

Q: There is now a moratorium on new IFQs (due to expire in October 2002). If IFQ programs have been so successful, why was a moratorium put into place?

One hurdle for IFQs has been the controversy surrounding the issue in the United States. We do not have a history of marine tenure or stewardship in this country; we treat the oceans more like a frontier, with the notion that the oceans are there for everyone and everyone can use them. Another was that many environmental groups interpreted IFQs as granting property rights. First of all, IFQs do not confer a real property right; they are really privileges granted by the government in the public trust and can be revoked by the government without compensation. The second objection was that if you give these property rights to corporations, they might buy up lots of shares and come to dominate fisheries, to the detriment of family and independent fishermen. Those objections are valid in some cases, but they can be mitigated by putting a cap on how many shares can be accumulated by a single corporation so a single entity cannot monopolize a single fishery and act perversely against the will of the people. IFQ programs are flexible enough so that measures to protect social and economic values can be built into them. A community can specify what's important to it and design an IFQ program that protects those values -- for instance, if it wants to protect family fishermen, it can specify that only members of the community can buy and sell these shares, or the community can specify that only the owner of quota share must be on board, thereby protecting against absentee ownership.

Q: In general, are commercial fishermen in favor of this system?

It's a mixed bag, but my sense is that more and more fishermen are coming to recognize that IFQs can help solve some of the pressing biological and economic problems they are now facing. IFQs are mostly allocated to the bigger boats these days, so the smaller fishermen tend to be opposed because they lose out in the initial share allocations and many times do not have the capital to buy shares. Environmental Defense and other groups are working to change that dynamic and get Congress to prescribe guidelines that would require the regional councils to make these allocations more fairly.