

# Time for some “Tough Love” from fisheries Managers

by CHARLES WITEK



*Charles Witek, from Greenwich CT, has spent over 50 years on the water, and is a well-known author and blogger. Witek said, “I have realized that without strong fisheries laws and effective conservation measures, the future of salt water fishing, and America's living marine resources, is dim.”*

“Tough love” has been defined as “promotion of a person’s welfare, especially that of an addict, child, or criminal, be enforcing certain constraints on them, or requiring them to take responsibility for their actions.”

In many ways, that exactly the role of a fisheries manager.

Fishermen, and fishing industries, obviously rely on having enough fish in the ocean to support their activities. Yet, the very nature of those activities involves removing fish from the sea; if taken too far, such removals can threaten the future of fishing, whether as avocation or occupation. Historically as well as today, fishermen have often failed to control their own actions, and have hurt themselves by driving important fish populations into decline.

**That’s where fisheries managers come in.**

When fishermen, focused only on today’s harvest, place their future welfare at risk, fishery managers have the job, and the obligation, of looking out for their welfare whether the fishermen want to be looked after or not.

Here in New York, the obligation to assure the states’ fisheries’ future is laid out in section 13-0105 of the Environmental Conservation Law, which begins

“It is the policy of the state that the primary principle in managing the state’s marine fishery resource is to maintain the long-term health and abundance of marine fisheries resources and their habitats, and to ensure that the resources are sustained in useable abundance and diversity for future generations.”

That’s a noble and worthwhile policy, but efforts to live up to it in the real world are often frustrated by the fishermen themselves, who tend to discount the future and spend most of their efforts trying to defeat any effort to conserve and rebuild fish stocks. So managers are often forced to impose unwanted and very unwelcome regulations on fishermen, in an effort to save them from themselves.

**That’s where the “tough love” comes in.**

If managers listened to fishermen, and more particularly, to the recreational and commercial fishing industry, many fish stocks would become overfished, and many already-overfished stocks would slip over the brink of collapse. Here in the northeast, we only need to look at the virtual disappearance of the southern New England/Mid-Atlantic stock of winter flounder, or the collapse of once-vast stocks of Atlantic cod, to see how that worked out.

Yet, even though the lessons of history should be obvious

to all, a large segment of the fishing industry has failed to learn them although, in all fairness, some of the most successful commercial fishermen now recognize that conservation really does pay, and in the most important currency—an abundance of fish that results in higher, more sustainable earnings.

Thus, managers must preserve the fishermen’s future, by establishing real constraints on their actions, and forcing them to take responsibility when they exceed sustainable landings limits.

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That doesn’t make managers popular with many industry members; like the parent trying to turn around the life of a sullen and drifting teen, or the parole officer trying to keep an offender from heading back to jail, fisheries managers are often condemned for their efforts to turn fishermen away from their self-destructive path

and onto a road that, in the end, will provide them with a better and more survivable future.

For the past few decades, I’ve watched managers use every skill that they owned in an effort to convince fishermen that conservative, science-based management was in their best interests, and I’ve watched a lot of those fishermen curse and complain, reviling the managers for trying to keep the future of their businesses alive.

Quite honestly, I’m not sure how they put up with it on a day-to-day basis; considering the abuse that they take at meetings, in publications and in various on-line forums, neither state, regional nor federal fisheries managers get paid nearly enough.

In many ways, along with shouldering their scientific and political burdens, they’re forced to act like underpaid nannies to a bunch of physically mature, but socially adolescent people who neither comprehend the science nor respect the management process.

Here in New York, the commercial fishermen are not, for the most part, badly behaved. They’re a little rough around the edges, at times, but in mostly a colorful way; while there is a certain amount of sharp-edged banter at meetings, in the end, they stay well within the bounds of acceptable discourse.

But when meetings affect the recreational industry, the atmosphere is very different. I thought of today’s “tough love” theme because, when I’m at a lot of these meetings, I feel as if I’m reliving my much younger days, and again seeing the inmates at my old junior high school’s detention hall. **(to page 38)**