

COMMERCIAL FISHING (from page 1)

All of the unwanted marine life is thrown overboard and, since most of it has been crushed in the process, much of it is already dead; hundreds of pounds of dead discards are common in a single tow. Those that sink quickly go to the bottom for the crabs or are eaten by fish, but those that stay near the surface are quickly picked up by seagulls.

This process of “**dragging**” is the most common way that commercial fish are captured and eventually brought to market in the United States.

On most any summer day from Point Judith to Narragansett Town Beach, if you look to the east you will see from four to 12 of these large vessels dragging bottom for whatever they can capture and bring to market. They move repeatedly north to south and south to north with hundreds of seagulls telling the tale of dead fish discarded over the side.

At the same time, on a decent weather day, within a mile or two of the area where these draggers are working, you will find 10 to 50 small boats with anglers working rod and reel with one or two baited hooks or lures hoping to hook one fish to either give a memorable fight and be set free or to measure up to the Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management minimum size requirements and to be taken home for dinner.

The contrast is stark, and seems to be much of a joke when one considers that recreational anglers actually contribute more to the local economy than commercial fishing — yet draggers are discarding many times more fish dead than recreational anglers harvest.

Another type of commercial fishing that is widely used in Rhode Island waters is **gillnetting**. This is a process where a lightweight net is lowered to the bottom of the ocean. The net has weights on one side (the groundline) and floats on the other side (the floatline). **It can be over a mile long** and normally only 10 feet wide so that it sits on the bottom and comes up about 10 feet. Fish that swim into the net get their gills tangled and can't escape. This net is left to sit on the bottom and is marked with floats at the ends.

When the fisherman returns, the net is hauled and whatever fish or other creatures are caught are sorted. Those that are desired and legal for sale are held and those that are unwanted or not of legal size are thrown overboard. Since these fish have been trapped by their gills for a long period of time most of the fish discarded are dead. This is why gillnet boats also have many seagulls following them and gorging themselves on the dead discards.

This indiscriminate killing of fish is not only wasteful, but also takes the area away from possible use by rod and reel fishers who hang up their fishing lures and weights when they drift through such an area.

In my opinion dragging or gillnetting is not the best way for us, as stewards of our marine resources, to utilize these nearshore coastal resources. But this is how commercial fishermen make a living. This is what they know how to do and they work hard

at it. It's not easy job. It's full of potential danger, and these men and women bring food to the table of U.S. consumers. They supply restaurants with fresh fish.

However, there must be a better way to harvest wild fish without such an impact on the environment.

Commercial fishermen have been concerned with the potential destructive capacity of dragging for hundreds of years. As long ago as 1376, commercial hook fishermen petitioned the English parliament to ban dragging because “it swept up too many under sized fish and the quality of harvest was poor.”

In the 1880s, the first beam trawler came to Gloucester, Mass., but fishers thought it was a bad idea because it “took too many fish and damaged the ocean floor.”

Also, according to an article published Oct. 3, 1911 in the *Gloucester Daily Times*, commercial fishermen demanded that Congress ban trawling.

Many states have banned gillnets and dragging in local waters out to 3 miles or in large areas such as Buzzard's Bay, but these fishing methods are allowed in most all of Rhode Island's waters except the upper reaches of Narragansett Bay.

We need to consider how some areas could be preserved for rod and reel fishing so that recreational and commercial rod and reel fishers are not directly competing with large-scale net fishing. This may be especially useful in areas near port where small-boat fishing is concentrated.

The European Union has, for years, banned commercial vessels from throwing unwanted fish back into the sea. This law, known as **Landing Obligation**, is not liked by commercial fishermen who only want to keep — and take up cold storage aboard — those fish that will bring the most value when sold upon return to port.

A [2019 article](https://www.sciencemag.org/news/2019/01/controversial-european-policy-bans-ships-throwing-unwanted-fish-overboard) in *Science* discusses some of the potential benefits of such a law and why fishermen have been filing exemptions to try to avoid compliance. (See <https://www.sciencemag.org/news/2019/01/controversial-european-policy-bans-ships-throwing-unwanted-fish-overboard>)

Such a discard ban should be one of the options considered for U.S. fisheries. It is much more important to feed people than seagulls.

I don't have the ultimate answer to many of the issues I raise, but I know we are not doing what we should be doing to preserve fishing and the marine environment for future generations.

I am not suggesting that all Rhode Island state waters become net-free zones as some recreational anglers have proposed, but I do think changes are necessary. I also think commercial fishermen need to be part of this discussion and they need to take on responsibility for the waste in their industry.

By working together we may be able to make progress on this issue. I think it is time for intelligent conversation that is not distracted by emotional responses on any side of this issue. It's time to improve how we treat the marine environment.

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