

# New England is cool to area-based fisheries management

By Benjamin Neal

As New England groundfish managers grind slowly into the process of developing a 16th amendment to an already altered and not very successful groundfish management plan, there have been calls to look at very different alternative methods for rebuilding this most iconic and beleaguered of fisheries.

The current system relies on limits on "Days at Sea" (DAS), controlling the amount of cod, haddock, hake and other fish taken out of Georges Bank and the Gulf of Maine through strict caps on how many days a year individual fishermen can set their gear.

One alternative that has been proposed to this DAS system is commonly called "area-based management."

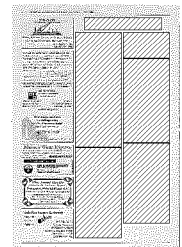
Area-based-management plans for fisheries aim to conserve and rebuild fish stocks through developing a regionalized regulatory structure that takes into account local biological and economic factors. The hope is that this will give some measure of control to smaller, more local and responsive political bodies, thus creating more effective and long-lasting conservation of the resource. This idea has been recently supported for the groundfish fishery by a Maine-based coalition including fishermen, scientists and local environmental groups working together. This campaign, known as the Area Management Coalition, has support from The Northwest Atlantic Marine Alliance (NAMA), the Mid-Coast Fishermen's Association, the group IFISH, the Island Institute, The Nature Conservancy, The Ocean Conservancy and the Conservation Law Foundation.

So far, area-based management has been coolly received at best by the New England Fisheries Management Council. This fisheries oversight

body has 18 representatives, including the regional administrator of the federal National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) and the principal state officials with fishery management responsibility for Maine, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Rhode Island and Connecticut, as well as 12 other nominated members.

A look at other fisheries might give some hints. The best example close to home is the lobster fishery. No lobster fisherman would think of going into another region, even a neighboring region, as he would surely lose his gear. In groundfish this is not so, and permits are legally good for the entire region from Canada to Rhode Island. The idea of exclusion, which is central to lobstering, sits poorly with many groundfishermen, who want to be able to follow the fish as they migrate.

California has discussed a similar initiative in its groundfish fishery, called the "Cape to Cape" idea. Under this scheme, the coast would be divided up into three regions, designed to represent natural socio-ecological system boundaries. There would be three such areas, split at Cape Mendocino, Cape Blanco and Point Conception. The state management group is currently working on separate stock assessments in each area in order to gauge the strength of the individual stocks, prior to investigating regulatory divisions. However, this fishery is perhaps not directly comparable to New England's. The three areas represent a more obvious natural division than exists in New England, and are already used for statistical division of fish catches. The fish themselves have also been shown to often stay their entire lives in a very small area, unlike cod and haddock, which migrate seasonally. The regulations in this region are also primarily within three nautical miles of shore, and thus legally the issue is up to state regulators, and not within the



realm of the federal government.

**PROTECTED AREAS** — It is notable that California has moved to develop a large-scale, coast wide system of integrated marine protected areas (MPAs). This system is now being put into place, and the new protected areas are being monitored for recovery. This series of reserves will, it is believed, strengthen the case for area-based management, as local regions will have more of a stake in preserving a recovered resource. New England currently has no such system, and thus less incentive for local protection of specific areas and fishing rights. The development of protected areas that are allowed to recover to the point where they are contributing to fish catches in a region has been tied to effective area-based control.

The Northern Gulf of California is in Mexican waters, and local fishing groups here are often given exclusive rights to the resources in designated areas. These “ejidos” consist of communally owned lands and rights, and have the ability to manage the areas themselves, within the framework of national laws. The community-based system has been effective for some non-migratory resources, like some fish, but has suffered from environmental effects originating outside the borders of the relatively small group areas. Shrimp harvesting in particular has been

subject to the diffuse and deleterious effects of coastal development, overfishing, and estuary destruction. Ejideros are in many cases now trying to sell their community rights to the highest bidder, due in many cases to these outside influences. The effort to preserve the area-based management system in Baja, Mexico has been financially supported by the American David and Lucille Packard Foundation, which has been key in supporting the needed science and advocating for local control.

For area-based management of fishery resources to succeed, there must be effective exclusion of outside parties, potentially expensive science-based ecological information, a basis in real resource structure in order to avoid being subject to the depredations of other groups, and some habitat protection for the local fish. As Maine sends its representatives to the Fishery Management Council, these cautionary tales from elsewhere should help direct their efforts to secure a lasting future for cod, haddock, and hake chowders along the coast. ▼

*Benjamin Neal is a doctoral student at the Scripps Institution of Oceanography in La Jolla, CA. Formerly, he was marine resources director at the Island Institute.*