

Echoes – Newfoundland Outport Fisheries and Indigenous Traditions

By Barry Darby and Helen Forsey

The abstract and conclusion below are excerpted from an article submitted for an e-book on small-scale fisheries in Canada, to be published in 2022.

Abstract: This article argues the need for a fundamental shift in fish harvesting policy and practice in order to build future sustainability for the marine environment and fisheries. The new paradigm must prioritize small-scale fishing, and be re-envisioned in accordance with the traditional understandings and approach of Indigenous peoples. It must incorporate and apply the local knowledge and methods proven in Indigenous communities and in Newfoundland and Labrador's outport past.

The authors describe features and characteristics of both Indigenous and outport harvesting traditions, highlighting how both contrast with the present-day large-scale industrial approach to fishing. They note how, despite fundamental differences, outport and Indigenous traditions sometimes echo each other, and suggest that those echoes represent valuable insights.

Based on those insights, they urge a shift to a predominantly small-scale fishery that effectively recognizes human harvesters as part of the ecosystem. It should operate in a framework of respect and reciprocity with "all our relations" as Indigenous traditions teach, draw on the practical knowledge and harvesting methods that enabled a sustainable outport fishery in Newfoundland and Labrador's past, and implement the lessons shared by both sets of traditions.

Conclusion: Large-scale industrial fishing is not only environmentally unsustainable, it is also inefficient in economic terms and counter-productive socially. Seeing a dragger arrive in Burin with 500,000 lbs of cod, Barry's Uncle Frank commented: "Dere's enough fish in 'er to keep two or three families going for a year, but all the crew's getting is two weeks' wages." Caught between a rock and a hard place, and "managed" by DFO, Newfoundland and Labrador's inshore harvesters were steered into destructive compliance on the margins of the industrial model.

Like industrial agriculture, industrial fisheries are part of the toxic legacy of patriarchal Western renaissance ideas about controlling Nature. The very term "fisheries management" embodies this approach, which has been thoughtfully challenged at a fundamental level elsewhere. The ongoing depletion of marine life worldwide is the result, echoed by parallel disasters in forests and farmlands.

If we want a viable future for ourselves and all our relations, we must step off our current destructive path and choose a better way. There are signs that can be done. In Ardoch, Algonquins and their allies still harvest their rice from canoes and "dance" it to edible form. In Fogo and Petty Harbour, harvesters catch top-quality fish by handlining in gillnet-free zones. But it will take more than that.

Indigenous prophecies describe our era as that of the Seventh Fire, a time when humanity must choose what path we will take into the future. Setting the course for fisheries will be part of that choice, and for that, the wisdom and knowledge of traditional harvesters will be essential.

That knowledge is of two very different kinds. The local knowledge and traditional fishing methods of the non-Indigenous people of the outports, proven through several centuries of sustainable harvesting, can be relearned and adapted for continuing use. But it is the other vast knowledge system – the Indigenous understanding of the natural world and humans' place within it – that must form the indispensable framework for applying the specific local and practical knowledge of both Indigenous and outport harvesters.

Hope lies in using the marks of our Indigenous and outport past to set a course based in respect and reciprocity, to navigate safely and to harvest honourably the stormy waters of the future, listening through the fog for the echoes that can tell us how.