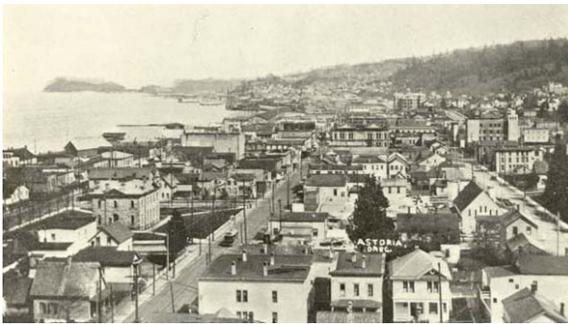




# Backgrounder: Fishing Communities

## What is a Fishing Community?

Although from a distance the “fishing community” may seem like a single group of like-minded people, it actually consists of many communities based on gear type, fishery, geography, and values. Social scientists spend a lot of time trying to define “community” so that communities can be studied and compared. The Magnuson-Stevens Act (MSA) defines a fishing community as “a community which is substantially dependent on or substantially engaged in the harvest or processing of fishery resources to meet social and economic needs, and includes fishing vessel owners, operators, and crew and United States fish processors that are based in such community.”



Astoria, Oregon. From “Best Historic Fishing”

In interpreting this definition, the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) has stated that “A fishing community is a social or economic group whose members reside in a specific location...” This “official” interpretation means that a fishing community exists in a specific place like Astoria, San Pedro, or Seattle. However, other types of communities exist. For example, an “occupational community” is a group of people involved

in the same occupation, like the coastwide community of trawlers who engage in similar activities. A “community of interest” is made up of people who share similar interests - for example, people who are concerned about making the fishing industry safer. One town or city might include many different occupational communities and communities of interest.

However you define fishing communities, it can be said that they are composed of diverse, independent people who do not fit easily into neat categories and who rarely, if ever, present themselves as a homogeneous group.

## The Community Conundrum

Not much information on fishing communities has been systematically gathered. One reason for this is because most funding for fisheries management goes towards assessing fish stocks. For example, the NMFS’ 2002 budget requested more than \$200.8 million for biological fisheries research, compared to \$3.4 million for economics, statistics, and other social



From "Best Historic Fishing" (<http://66.154.152.16/gallery/albums.php>)

research. Another reason that information has not been systematically gathered is because the instability and complexity of the fishing industry make it very hard to pin down. Census data does not differentiate between fishery and forestry occupations, and concerns about identifying individuals, businesses, and privileged information limits the publication of economic data that would be useful for studying the economic importance of fishing activities. To complicate matters, many fishing communities are unincorporated or are parts of larger communities that do not rely on fishing (for example, Los Angeles). Also, many fishing community members only fish part time, or hold other jobs while they fish. In a way, collecting community information is about as hard as collecting information on fish stocks—both populations are highly mobile and exist in a complex and constantly-changing universe.

## What Does Management Say about Fishing Communities?

The 1996 revision of the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act, which is the basis for fisheries management in the United States, recognizes the importance of human communities and their relationship to fisheries. Among other things, its National Standard 8 declares that fishery conservation must take into account the importance of fishery resources to fishing communities, with the goals of providing for the “sustained participation” of those communities in fisheries and minimizing “adverse economic impacts” as much as possible. This focus on communities represents a shift taking place in many areas of natural resource management. However, funding for studying the effects of management on communities remains at a low level.

The National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) process also calls for an assessment of the impacts of actions on communities. As part of the NEPA process, both economic factors (economic base, employment, revenue, income, etc.) and social factors (population dynamics, social institutions, environmental justice, cultural values, community identity, history, etc.) need to be addressed in environmental assessments and environmental impact statements. However, NEPA states that “economic or social effects are not intended by themselves to require preparation of an environmental impact statement.”

In addition to these federal mandates, a growing number of natural resource managers recognize the importance of including the views and values of diverse “stakeholders”—including fishing community members—in the management process. In fact, the regional fishery management council process was set up specifically to include stakeholders in the process. People who effectively represent the concerns of their communities can help create more effective and efficient fisheries management.

## What Research and Data Collection is Taking Place?

- In January 2005, Council staff developed a white paper on non-economic social science needs in the Council process ([http://www.pcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/sswp\\_final.pdf](http://www.pcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/sswp_final.pdf)).
- NMFS anthropologists at the Northwest Fisheries Science Center have developed community summaries for the West Coast. Related community descriptions were also created by staff at Pacific States Marine Fisheries Commission. These summaries will be used in future environmental impact statements and

management decisions.

- The Council's Research and Data Needs document outlines the Council's needs in these areas. It is updated on a biennial basis.
- The Fisheries Economics Data Program (EFIN) conducts annual industry cost and effort surveys. It has also collected several datasets of interest to fisheries economists, including labor and wage statistics, fuel prices, and measures of changing prices and living conditions. EFIN is housed at the Pacific States Marine Fisheries Commission (PSMFC).

## Other Resources and publications

- PSMFC's list of resources for fisheries economists. <http://www.psmfc.org/efin/abstracts-data.html>
- OneFish's fishing community knowledge directory. Includes information on economics, social science, and other topics. <http://www.onefish.org/global/index.jsp>
- Oregon Sea Grant (<http://seagrant.oregonstate.edu/index.html>) and Washington Sea Grant (<http://www.wsg.washington.edu/>) sponsor research on economic and community development.
- NMFS fisheries statistics and economics (<http://www.st.nmfs.gov/st1/>)
- NMFS Northeast Fisheries Science Center Sociocultural and Economic Survey Initiative (<http://www.nefsc.noaa.gov/read/socialsci/survey-initiative/>)
- NMFS: Studies on Community Impacts of Fishing Regulations ([http://www.st.nmfs.gov/st1/econ/cia/impact\\_studies.html](http://www.st.nmfs.gov/st1/econ/cia/impact_studies.html))
- Fishfolk, a fisheries social science discussion group (<http://mailman.mit.edu/mailman/listinfo/fishfolk>)
- Gilden, Jennifer, ed. 1999. Oregon's Changing Coastal Fishing Communities. Corvallis: Oregon Sea Grant publication #ORES-U-99-001. Contains overviews of Oregon's coastal fishing communities, as well as discussions of sustainability and community, helping fishing family members cope with change, developing data, and an annotated bibliography of related research. Available to order at Oregon Sea Grant at 541-737-2716.

## Who to Contact at the Council

Jim Seger (economist): [jim.seger@noaa.gov](mailto:jim.seger@noaa.gov)

Jennifer Gilden (social science): [jennifer.gilden@noaa.gov](mailto:jennifer.gilden@noaa.gov)

Both may be reached by telephone at 503-820-2280 or toll free at 866-806-7204.

*Last updated March 29, 2011*