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Jim Balsiger column: Growth of local community supported fishing projects impressive in New England

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My View by Jim Balsiger - Sept 8, 2009

More and more, Americans are interested in buying and eating seafood that they know has been caught in a sustainable manner.

Strong public interest in sustainable seafood is also fueling an impressive movement in Gloucester, in other parts of New England and around the nation to connect local fishermen more directly with local consumers as farmer's markets have long connected local farmers with consumers.

In Gloucester, seafood lovers can join a new community supported fishery project called Cape Ann Fresh Catch that is run by the nonprofit Gloucester Fishermen's Wives Association. Cape Ann Fresh Catch, modeled after the highly successful community supported agriculture projects, started in June and already has 780 members who pay in advance for a share of fish each week. Members pick up locally caught whole cod, haddock or other fish at one of a number of pickup locations around the North Shore.

Angela Sanfilippo, the president of the Gloucester Fishermen's Wives Association, wants members of the community supported fishery to get more than fresh, wholesome fish.

'People learn how to use a whole fish,' she says, adding that this helps minimize wasted fish. 'We're also doing cooking demonstrations and educating people on how fishermen fish today.'

The Northwest Atlantic Marine Alliance, a nonprofit dedicated to sustainable marine ecosystems and sustainable fishing communities, is a prime mover behind community supported fishery projects. NAMA helped the first New England CSF get started in Port Clyde, Maine. There are now six CSFs in Maine, two in New Hampshire and the Gloucester-based Cape Ann Fresh Catch.

NAMA is working with various communities this summer and early fall to put on 'Seafood Throwdowns.' At these public events, local chefs compete to prepare the best dish using locally caught seafood. Niaz Dorry, the coordinating director of the Northwest Atlantic Marine Alliance, says the throwdowns are a fun way to bring together people from the community, the fishing industry, the environmental community and policymakers to talk about sustainable seafood. These groups share common ground in wanting healthy coastal communities, marine ecosystems and fresh local seafood.

'Healthy fishing communities and their commercial fisheries are essential to the recovery and health of the marine ecosystem,' Ms. Dorry says. 'Creating and expanding market appreciation for locally caught seafood is one way to get there. Doing so allows fishermen to have a better return on smaller catches and consumers to get quality seasonal seafood and learn how to use more of the fish so less ends up in the garbage.'

In Portland, Maine, another nonprofit organization the Gulf of Maine Research Institute is developing labeling that will help consumers find and buy locally caught seafood in their supermarkets, restaurants and other retail outlets. This benefits local fishermen, distributors, consumers and the local economy.

The Gulf of Maine Research Institute recently published a survey of the greater Portland area that showed a high proportion of people are willing to pay more if they know the fish they buy is caught by local fishermen. The survey also found people want to buy fish caught in sustainable ways. 'This survey confirmed what we already believed,' said Jennifer Levin, sustainable seafood program manager for the research institute.

The New England groundfishing industry is making one of the most significant transitions in its history with the development of sector management.

The plan approved by the New England Fishery Management Council includes catch shares that will be allocated to sectors or groups of fishermen. Catch shares will give fishermen greater incentives to conserve and rebuild fish stocks and greater flexibility to fish their shares when markets, weather and individual business conditions are most favorable.

Although community supported fisheries and other efforts to market local seafood may not be directly tied to sectors, these efforts across New England to connect fishermen with consumers will help in this transition and will strengthen coastal communities.

I welcome your comments. Please send them to me at public.concerns.groundfish@noaa.gov.

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