

BRIDGES OVER TROUBLED WATERS

Connecting Coastal Communities for Fishery Conservation



Tony Charles' first professional love was mathematics—perhaps not what you might first guess when you see this gregarious man organizing conversations and meetings between fishermen and their communities. Charles first became involved with Canada's coastal communities during the early 1990s, when they were being hit by a combination of collapsing fish stocks and a lack of attention from government. He realized that a continuation of past fishery policy, which failed to involve communities in management, would be a recipe for future conservation disasters. Over the next

several years, he gradually made more and deeper connections with fishing communities and associations. Then in 2001, Charles was awarded a Pew Marine Conservation Fellowship to develop a community-based fisheries project named "Turning the Tide."

Carrying the slogan, "Communities Managing Fisheries Together," Turning the Tide has so many strands that it resembles a fishing net. One group of threads links fishing people in the Canadian Maritime provinces with those on the Pacific coast, while another group builds relationships between Canadian Native (Aboriginal) people and non-Native communities, along with their commercial fishing associations. More strands connect Canadian coastal communities with counterparts in the Northeast United States.

Canada's coastal waters are troubled after decades of overfishing, pollution, and land-based development, to name just a few challenges. Communities of Native and non-Native fishermen alike have suffered the consequences of fewer fish and reduced livelihoods. Charles saw the 1999 Marshall Decision, which restored the rights of Native communities to hunt and fish in Canada's east coast commercial fisheries, as an opportunity to work with Native and non-Native communities and to promote sustainable fishing.

Relationships Turn the Tide

Turning the Tide builds on the understanding that through a local approach to management, people can improve the sustainability of fisheries, simultaneously improving marine conservation and the well-being of coastal communities. This project seeks to create common ground among Native and non-Native fishermen through cooperative community-based management initiatives, by developing mechanisms for working together and by providing academic, financial, organizational and moral support to communities wishing to develop capacity and expertise. "What community gives," says Charles, "is the sense that you live by and are responsible for a particular piece of the coast and the ocean." He envisions this as an approach in which fishermen

By Susan Altman

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—Tony Charles



Tony Charles, Pew Marine Conservation Fellow, Class of 2001

and their communities will become able to take on primary responsibility for stewardship of marine resources and management of fisheries.

The project is now a vibrant partnership involving amazingly diverse groups, from the Acadia First Nation (a Mi'Kmaq Native tribe in southwest Nova Scotia) to the Bay of Fundy Inshore Fishermen's Association (a multi-species community-based fishermen's organization) to the Fundy Fixed Gear Council (a community-based groundfish management board). Altogether, Turning the Tide has established ties with over 20 organizations, from village-based Native tribes to regional, highly institutionalized management associations. One innovative activity—"study tours" that Charles and his colleagues have organized on both East and West coasts—brings diverse groups of 10-20 people together to travel and learn. Between meetings and study tours, Charles estimates that at least 100 people have been involved.

"People have met others they would never have dreamed of talking to before, and they have developed real friendships and much greater understanding," says Charles. "It's clear that relationships matter. This is the first step in developing management and conservation processes that can work, and it is definitely happening through our project."

Accomplishments of the Project

Charles says that success for this project "is measured not by the number of fish tagged, or the number of management plans written, but more nebulously, in terms of capacity-building, education, and most crucially, the positive human interactions engendered. In particular," he stresses, "we see success in bringing together people who need to work cooperatively to achieve marine conservation and community well-being, but who historically have had little interaction with one another."

Turning the Tide has already achieved significant concrete results:

- * A series of a dozen team meetings among participating organizations, providing ongoing information exchange, development of organizational linkages, formulation of community-based management approaches, and development of trust among participants.
- * A day-long workshop on community-based fishery and coastal management, open to the public but targeted to government managers and policymakers unfamiliar with this management option.
- * Three study tours—two to Vancouver Island, British Columbia, and another trans-boundary tour taking in both Canadian Maritimes and Northeast U.S. fishing communities. This last tour included eight stops, at which participant workshops, public events, and local briefings were held.
- * Facilitation and coordination support for the Bear River First Nation, a Mi'Kmaq community that has not yet signed an agreement with the federal government to gain access to the fisheries, in developing a fisheries management plan.
- * Funding for four young people to attend a three-week community-based management training program at St. Francis Xavier University. Charles says, "We consider this training program a particularly important long-term investment in community-based fishery management, as the participating individuals represent key youth of the communities."
- * Partnerships with the Saltwater Network (a new organization linking marine conservation and local management groups on the Canadian and



Mona Madill describes fishery challenges in her Native community on Canada's Pacific coast, during Turning the Tide's Gulf of Maine tour

U.S. sides of the Gulf of Maine/Bay of Fundy, and channeling financial resources to support work on ecological and fishery-oriented projects) and the North Atlantic Marine Alliance (a primarily New England based but increasingly transboundary organization focusing on the Gulf of Maine from community and ecosystem perspectives).

- * Development of a brochure and a website to provide a public profile for Turning the Tide as well as to highlight the concept of community-based fishery management and its potential in the Canadian Maritimes and beyond.

Future of the Project

Turning the Tide has proven how efforts to develop and transform interactions among people can significantly support marine conservation and management. At the same time, Charles points out, this human angle means that the rate of progress depends inherently on how fast such interpersonal relationships can be built up. "We have learned that there is no substitute for time-time for dialogue and listening, time for those from our diverse participating organizations to reach common understanding of key values, principles and goals."

Charles feels that investing all this time reaps significant rewards. "The idea behind Turning the Tide—making connections and bringing people together—is becoming self-sustaining among the participants, and there is a clear potential to take the approach into new arenas." To help on that front, the Turning the Tide team is working on a community-based fisheries handbook, to share insights from the project. "It's the first of its kind, as far as we know, in the 'developed' world," says Charles.

He adds, "Turning the Tide participants have every intention of continuing their interactions into the future. We are working on ways to maintain linkages between participants in the Canadian Maritimes, British Columbia, and New England, to further explore connections between Natives and non-Natives, and to develop new local initiatives."

With someone as talented in relationship-building as Tony Charles leading the initiative, Turning The Tide will certainly continue to build and fortify bridges between fishing communities for years to come.



Some of the many participants of Turning the Tide.