



## The End of Cod

Posted on February 18, 2013 by Erik Loomis

A couple of weeks ago, I decided to check out Cape Cod in the winter. It was pretty great, even if cold. On my way to the Cape, I drove past a Wendy's. They were offering a fish sandwich-made with North Pacific cod. That's right, North Pacific cod on Cape Cod.

The cod fishery of the North Atlantic and the livelihoods it sustained for 300 years are basically finished. The New England Fishery Management Council has reduced the cod catch by 77% in the Gulf of Maine, 61% on Georges Bank. The reality is that the fishers probably won't even catch that tiny quota. The fish are gone, driven to near extinction not by the family fishermen that work out of the small ports in New England but by giant industrial fishing trawlers that are taking every fish of any edible size out of the oceans at an alarming rate.

Here's a graph of the annual catch off the Grand Bank:



Reduced quotas have not brought the fish back in the last 15 years because there just aren't any left. The only way to bring this back at all is a total moratorium on fishing for at least 20

years and then maybe not. A lot of fishermen are angry-but what can we do? There's just no fish left.

There actually are two things we can do. Neither will bring the fish back, but that's a done deal. First, as the first linked article suggested, we can develop alternative economies for these fishing ports around wind energy. That's very different work than fishing, but it's something. Some of these cities-New Bedford for instance-have developed reasonable tourist industries and have attracted some young people to live there and build some kind of alternative economies. Many-Fall River for instance, a mere 15 miles from New Bedford-have not. This is the best and most obvious way to create at least some jobs based upon harvesting natural resources, albeit in a very different way.

The second thing we can do is to take some kind of national responsibility for workers who lose their jobs because of resource depletion. There's actually significant precedent for this in the Pacific Northwest. The Clinton Forest Plan that provided some finality to the old growth/spotted owl logging wars in the 1980s and early 1990s provided retraining programs for loggers and mill workers who lost their jobs due to the industry's disappearance. My own father took advantage of this program, although he later found work in another mill.

Even more interesting is the case of the Redwood Employee Protection Program. The first real battle in the Northwest over the forests, really the precursor to the spotted owl, was the successful campaign to expand Redwood National Park. When the bill was signed by President Carter in 1978, it included REPP, a program that provided significant payments to workers displaced by the mills that had to close down. They received direct payments from the federal government until 1984 to build a bridge until they could find other work. The generosity of this was controversial-Carter himself was quite skeptical. And in many ways it didn't work that well. There were battles over who should qualify-were the mills shutting down because of a lack of timber or because of globalization and mechanization? Moreover, there were some disappearing funds and management issues. We don't need to get into these details now. What's notable though is that at least one time the federal government decided to expand the welfare state, however tentatively, to workers unemployed in order to save rare resources.

Of course, this is politically impossible, even unthinkable, in the modern political climate. But rather than throw the fishermen and their families on the street with few economic opportunities, wouldn't a program to help build regional economies and stabilize communities make a lot more sense? I think it would.

## Author



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