

Politics distorts fish science, researchers say

Journal article proposes releasing data on stock levels simultaneously to public and DFO

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Canadian fisheries science has been so susceptible to manipulation by political forces that a completely independent fish-science organization should be seriously considered, three leading university researchers say.

They also say that to avoid future political distortion, all information on fish-stock levels should be released to the general public at the same time it is presented to the federal Department of Fisheries and Oceans.

Scientific disagreements should be publicly aired, along with estimates of uncertainty factors in making various estimations, the researchers say.

In an article, *Is Scientific Inquiry Incompatible With Government Information Control?* published in the May issue of the *Canadian Journal of Fisheries and Aquatic Sciences*, the researchers buttress their argument by detailing two instances in which they say the DFO either ignored, distorted or attempted to suppress scientific data that went against the wishes of politicians and bureaucrats.

The paper has drawn a sharp rebuke from the DFO, which is not only drafting a response for the June issue of *CJFAS* but also has sent an angry letter to Arthur Carry, president of the National Research Council, which publishes the journal.

The letter, signed by Fisheries deputy minister William Rowat, says in part that "these are not scientific papers. They are tabloid journalism of the sort one would not expect to encounter in a scientific journal. They are based on innuendo and misrepresentations which have no place in a scientific journal."

It characterizes David Cook, editor of the journal, and lead author Jeffrey Hutchings of Dalhousie University as former employees who used the journal "to launch a personal vendetta against the DFO, its scientists and its managers."

It further says the DFO should have been given an opportunity to respond in the same issue.

In the article, Prof. Hutchings, Carl Walters of the University of British Columbia and Richard Haedrich of Memorial University of Newfoundland first describe how various scientific warnings about the decline in the East Coast cod stock as a result of overfish-

ing dating back to 1986 were swept under the carpet.

The paper also reproduces a memorandum chastising Ransom Myers, then a DFO scientist, after he spoke to a *Globe and Mail* reporter about a scientific paper he had co-written in the distinguished, peer-reviewed *U.S. Journal of Science*.

The Science paper and Dr. Myers's remarks pinpointed overfishing as the chief culprit in cod declines.

After the newspaper article appeared, Dr. Myers was told that "[we] have cautioned you regarding statements which did not take into account peer reviewed scientific information. Your ... disregard for both departmental policy and the professional opinion of your colleagues warrant the disciplinary action of a written reprimand."

William Doubleday, director-general of fisheries and oceans science for the DFO, said the memo was drafted because it may have appeared that Dr. Myers's views were that of the department, which was not the case.

The *CJFAS* paper goes on to describe the almost complete disagreement between salmon scientists and political forces pushing for Alcan Aluminium Ltd.'s construction of a large dam on the Nechako River in British Columbia.

Highlighted is a 1986 memorandum from one of the scientists who was a member of a workshop trying to arrive at a consensus about the amount of water that should flow through the river.

"At a meeting in Vancouver on April 28 the [DFO] director-general in-

structed staff to support the minister's position while adhering to the scientific advice. As my statement shows, I find it impossible to do both. ... [It was] pointed out to me that those technical staff who do not support the minister 'must take their game and play elsewhere.' This underlines the seriousness of my predicament and makes me feel intimidated."

Eventually an agreement was arrived at that dramatically reduced the amount of water running in the Nechako Settlement Agreement of September 1987 is a poignant example of how government bureaucrats can, and do, interfere with science.

The researchers note with a certain irony that their proposals for a separation of scientists and policy makers amounts to a kind of back-to-the-future. Before 1972, most federal government fisheries research was conducted under the auspices of the politically independent Fisheries Research Board of Canada.

Finally, Mr. Cook, who is retiring as editor of the *CJFAS*, defended his publishing of the Hutchings-Walters-Haedrich paper both by arguing that "broad exposure and candid debate are the only healthy outcomes," and by detailing two instances in which DFO officials tried to influence the journal itself.

In one case in 1986, he said, "an unsuccessful attempt was made to alter a statement in an accepted paper which might have temporarily embarrassed the department."

And in 1984, he said, "an unethical verbal attempt was made ... to sub-

vert the anonymity of the peer review process regarding a paper that displeased the DFO."

He then argued: "It is my hope that widespread awareness of these problems may tend to reduce the incidence of systematic abuse by placing the community on guard and perhaps by inducing some bureaucratic caution in matters of scientific information control."

Dr. Doubleday responded to the charges in a number of ways.

"I don't see there is a problem that needs to be fixed. ... Our stock review process is more open than [similar] processes anywhere in the world," he said.

He argued that two cases of attempts at interferences — attempts he said the DFO has not been able to verify — hardly qualifies as systematic abuse.

Mr. Doubleday said the culture of the Fisheries Department has changed and much of what the paper is critical of occurred a decade or so ago. "The view today is to err on the side of the fish, not the fishermen," he said.

He added that it is impossible to display data as soon as it is collected for a number of reasons.

He argued that one sign of openness of the department is that much of the critical information in the *CJFAS* paper came from public statements by DFO employees or papers they published in the scientific literature.

For his part, Prof. Hutchings said he and his co-authors did not want a DFO response in the same issue because the usual situation in scientific journals is for responses to come later.