

# future of fish

## If you can't beat them, join them

An interview with Michael Bell and Chuck Cook, project directors with The Nature Conservancy's California Marine Program.

### Tell us a bit about how The Nature Conservancy's California Marine Program decided to become involved with the bottom-trawling fishery in California?

**CC:** In mid 2003, we were trying to determine the biggest threat to marine biodiversity in California, and bottom trawling was identified as triple threat: it affected seafloor habitats, had high bycatch rates because it's an indiscriminate form of fishing, and after 75 years, had removed enormous biomass from those ecosystems.

**MB:** This fishery in 1987, made 110 million and in 2003 it was only 35 million. So we started wondering, what is wrong with this fishery?

### Why didn't you choose to just lobby the government to ban or reduce trawling and establish marine protected areas?

**CC:** A quick evaluation told us that this particular trawl fishery was very entrenched in federal regulatory system—the thought of going into the government to transform the fishery was kind of a non-starter, knowing how slow those wheels turn. So we opted for private approach that left bureaucracy out.

### Where did you get the idea to buy-out trawler permits, and essentially become "fishermen"?

**CC:** TNC has a history and competency on land where they bought land and created nature reserves. In a way, we are reaching back into the past to chart new pathways into the future on how NGOs in the private sector can deal with fisheries and conservation. We decided that TNC would try to buy out federal fishing permits and vessels because this would reduce overcapitalization of the fishery and allowed us to become a significant participant in fishery— instead of a participant that just might litigate. We got a different seat at the table and good opportunity to use permits to transform fishery in important way—for the health of the ocean and for the fishermen.

### How does buying the permits help create a sustainable fishery?

**CC:** The Nature Conservancy (TNC) is a science-driven organization, and we looked at the extensive study by the Natural Resource Council that described how to abate the these threats: establish closures to protect benthic habitat and diversity; reduce amount of trawling to allow areas to restore; and third, modify gear to use those with less contact with bottom.



MICHAEL BELL

*Michael Bell is project director for the Central Coast Groundfish Project, where he manages a multi disciplinary team focused on transforming an important Californian fishery to sustainability through seafloor habitat protection. The Central Coast Groundfish Project has been recognized in national and international media as a promising new approach for reforming fisheries.*

# future of fish

**MB:** So Phase 1 was habitat protection.

**CC:** We invested a huge amount of research, data in terms of habitat types, past fishing grounds, etc. to help create a trawling zone (as opposed to closed areas where they couldn't go). By owning the permits, we created an opportunity for fishermen and TNC to agree on a strategy and jointly presented to the management council. Because fishermen were on board, they adopted it immediately. So this showed us that the regulatory bodies are hungry for innovative and joint projects between fishermen and NGOs. It breaks traditional battle lines between NGOs and fishermen that normally end in watered down compromise that sacrifice health of ocean and economics of fishermen.

## How did you get the fishermen to agree to be bought-out?

**CC:** We took a business approach, and said this was a strictly voluntary program with three options to consider: 1) we'll buy their trawl permit and fishing vessel and they could take the money and retire or pursue alternative business; 2) TNC would buy the trawl permit but fisherman can keep fishing as long they don't use bottom trawling; 3) we won't do any transaction and you keep doing what you're doing. So when you give options, and voluntary, creates an attitude where maybe we can do business together. In the end we got 7 permits and now we are taking these assets and using them to help harmonize ecological and economic impacts that the fishery has.

## So now there are less fishermen and closed areas. Is the goal for sustainability just a smaller fishery?

**MB:** A sustainable fishery is not just environmentally but also economically so. We needed to provide viable economic opportunities. So, the concept here is to try and move fishery from a high volume low value business model (which is basically the trawl model) to one that may catch less fish but catches in premium condition and targets high value markets.

## So how does owning these assets help to the create a higher-end fishery?

**MB:** By restricting trawling to more appropriate habitat, there is an opportunity to fish with other gear types—hook and line, traps. This other gear never had the opportunity here because the area was dominated by trawlers. So, after trawling areas designated we started Phase 2 because we realized we could use assets (our trawling permits) to catalyze a change in the harvest techniques of fishery and thereby hopefully protect biodiversity that we care about.

We have licensed 1 permit back to a trawler but incorporated terms into the agreement: he is geographically restricted and using modified techniques. We are monitoring him closely so we can collect data as he moves on. He is doing shorter tows in designated areas and bycatch is few and looks like it is economically viable. He is going to market types we talk about- higher end.



**CHUCK COOK**

*Chuck Cook, a 27-year veteran of The Nature Conservancy, recently transitioned from the director of the Coastal and Marine Program for the California Nature Conservancy into the role of project leader for The Sustainable Fisheries Group (SFG). The SFG is a new alliance between the University of California at Santa Barbara, Environmental Defense Fund, and the Nature Conservancy of California that operates on the principal that successful fisheries require institutions to provide economic incentives to fishermen and that these incentives lead to behavior consistent with marine conservation.*

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## What other advantages does your approach (buying permits) offer for increasing sustainability?

**MB:** Practically speaking, TNC is in line to receive a fair amount of quota allocation. We would like to divest of that in a local association/cooperative that has proper governance and appropriate conservation parameters. To preserve and anchor access to the resource is the first job. For example, if fishermen Smith wanted to get out of trawl business, an association formed locally here could seek capital and buy quota before it migrates away.

We want to keep testing collaborative association idea of how fishermen can pool and share catch limits for future, how to help fishermen better monitor themselves and how to collaborate on mapping to map where each set happens, what it looks like, and incidence of overfished species so can build more data on where those species are and avoid in the future.

## What is the biggest lesson you have learned in taking this approach to fisheries conservation?

**MB:** So the big picture here is that through this collaboration we see a lot can be achieved: break fishery from high volume low value model, preserve access to resource and help fish stock and habitat be preserved.

For me- there is something that really sticks out as necessary to meet this challenge. You have to keep objectives true and consistent: more sustainable fishery, reduce bycatch and habitat impacts and protect marine biodiversity. But strategies and how to accomplish this must be flexible. Need to be willing to learn. When started- we were focused on how much can we eliminate trawling, wanted to limit as much as could. We have learned it is much more complex than that. We've accepted fact that can't just end trawling, have to be opened minded and find a way to sustainably harvest flatfish, and that includes improving how trawl operates.

CHUCK COOK & MICHAEL BELL

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