

## Other Voices

### Men of their word

The herring fishermen of Norton Sound have proven to one and all that their word is good. About six months ago a handful of Norton Sound gillnetters travelled to Anchorage to tell the state Board of Fisheries that they knew how to fish herring. They travelled from Unalakleet, Stebbins, Shaktoolik and Nome to tell the board that they and their neighbors could handle all of the herring that would be available for harvest in Norton Sound.

One by one they got up before the board and quietly and confidently said that they were fishermen — good fishermen. They said that the villagers of Norton Sound could harvest not only the guideline harvest level for Norton Sound of 1,000 metric tons, but twice that much if the stocks could support such a harvest. They came prepared with the names of their neighbors who were planning to fish, inventories of boats and nets available to the fishermen, and a specific plan for how they intended to train and prepare their fishermen for the spring season.

There were a number of people last December who did not want to believe that the villagers of Norton Sound were serious about fishing — most notably the purse seiners who had harvested the largest share of Norton Sound herring during the 1979 season. They and others said that there was no way that small skiffs could harvest the available resource. They were certain that if the Sound were closed to seiners, the resource would go unharvested and an allocation of the unharvested surplus would go to the foreign trawl fleet.

The question of whether to close Norton Sound to seining was one of the most controversial issues of the entire winter board meeting, producing hours and hours of testimony and debate. In the end, the local fishermen with their quiet sincerity and self-assurance convinced the board, and won.

There was a great sense of victory following the Board's approval of a gillnet-only fishery, but the fishermen realized that the Board's decision marked only the beginning and not the end of their struggle. The informal but clearly-recognized agreement that they had with the Board was that they had one year to prove themselves. If they did not perform, the seiners would be allowed back in.

Well, the fishermen did perform and they performed with excellence. They harvested 2,200 metric tons of herring as of this writing, and are still fishing the surprisingly abundant Norton Sound stock. Also, by carefully test netting before harvesting new fish, they produced consistently high quality herring, averaging 8 to 8½ percent roe recovery.

The Norton Sound Fishermen's Coop at Unalakleet, the largest herring buyer in Norton Sound this season, also showed its stuff. They handled all the fish available with efficiency, and through skillful price negotiations with the company they sold their fish to, they were able to pay their fishermen an average of \$280 per ton, compared with the \$200 per ton average at Togiak.

Despite the success of the Norton Sound gillnetters and the gillnetters at Cape Romanzof, Goodnews Bay and Security Cove, the experience of the local fishermen in Bristol Bay lends a dark side to this year's herring season. A huge number of local gillnetters there were unable to find markets for their herring, and as a result, the gill net fishery was a bust. Only about 2,300 metric tons out of a total delivered harvest of 18,000 metric tons came from gill netters. In addition, a great deal of gill net fish had to be dumped by fishermen who could find no buyer.

The waste and the frustration in the Bay could have been avoided if the proposal that Bristol Bay herring fishermen brought to the fisheries board last December had been adopted. Their proposal called for the minimum gill net quota of 6,000 metric tons. Establishment of this quota would have assured a market for local fishermen and would have resulted in a wiser, more efficient use of the herring resource.

As this December's Board of Fisheries meeting nears, I hope that the lessons of the 1980 herring season are not forgotten.

—David Hoffman  
Bering Sea Fisherman



Herring

Photograph by ROBERT KOWELUK