

Book Review

Webster, D.G. 2009. *Adaptive Governance: The Dynamics of Atlantic Fisheries Management*. Cambridge: The MIT Press.

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In 1998, conservation organisations across the United States, led by SeaWeb and the National Resources Defence Council organized the Give Swordfish a Break campaign. In this campaign were enlisted hundreds of chefs, many from the best restaurants, a hotel chain, cruise lines, supermarket chains and so on. By June even the President was publically calling for a ban on the import of North Atlantic swordfish below a minimum size. It was one of the earliest examples of what since that time has become perhaps our greatest hope for addressing the huge overfishing problem: labelling schemes and other direct appeals to consumers to buy only sustainably caught fish. The Give Swordfish a Break campaign ended three years later, declaring victory after the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas (ICCAT) instituted strong limits on fishing that led to the eventual rebuilding of the Atlantic swordfish stock. Arrayed against this well funded and elite-driven campaign was the US East Coast long line fleet: circa 200 boats most of which are <12 metres long. Such fishing vessels are assets roughly equivalent to a small family farm.

The relevance of this story to evaluating D.G. Webster's *Adaptive Governance: The Dynamics of Atlantic Fisheries Management* is that it does not figure in her explanation of the political dynamics of Atlantic fisheries management within ICCAT. Indeed, her first mention of the various actors she lumps together as “non-commercial” interests occurs on page 42.

Webster's explanation takes the form of the “Vulnerability Response Framework” (VRF) a qualitative appropriation of game theory-type reasoning that predicts negotiation positions. The VRF assumes that the driving force behind US (and other countries') policy at ICCAT is the characteristics of the fishing fleet. The idea is that fishing fleets have two characteristics: a) their competitiveness,

which is a function of their operating costs per unit of catch; and b) their flexibility, which is a function of the ability of the capital and labour of the fleet to move into other sectors. By dichotomizing these two variables she creates a four-cell schema in which each cell predicts a different kind of response by countries in ICCAT when scientists believe stronger management is required to sustain a stock.

The book consists of testing the VRF against the history of the management of eight ICCAT stocks. She does this in a very detailed, straightforward and rigorous manner. The VRF works well in many cases. When the VRF does not work she is usually able to find reasonable explanations for the deviations.

After all, while the idea that fleet characteristics are driving US positions may seem pretty questionable, in many other countries it is reasonable to assume that commercial interests are, or at least have been, the most important driver. Furthermore, the US, the most powerful country in ICCAT, almost always appears in the low flexibility, low competitiveness cell because that is where its marginal fishing fleet belongs. States in this cell are expected to demand strong management measures, and that is what the US usually does; exactly the same outcome that an explanation based on “non-commercial” influences would predict. The author acknowledges this “potential confounding variable” (p 232) although she does not acknowledge that commercial interests may actually be secondary.

While the flaw of playing down the influence of “non-commercial” interests is not fatal to her goal of developing her fairly circumscribed theoretical scheme, it is an important one from the perspective of understanding the dynamics of Atlantic fisheries management. The aggregate manner in which she uses the term “non-commercial” is misleading. The first case where “non-commercial” interests appear as an important explanation of deviations from the VRF’s predictions is with respect to recreational fishers’ influence on marlin management. Although the author does not describe this, the recreation interests in question contain well organized and strongly committed hobbyists, lots of whom fish from yachts, as well as huge commercial interests in the form of both equipment suppliers and tournament organizers. Other “non-commercial” influences on ICCAT are scientists, many of whom are deeply committed to conservation, NGOs, and consumer movements. Perhaps the greatest weakness of VRF scheme is that the actors it focuses on are the ones that are fading while it ignores those with growing influence. I do not expect the usefulness of the VRF to increase with time.

Finally, the choice of the title is just mysterious. The only links made to “adaptive governance” are some assertions that the prediction of negotiating positions is useful for understanding it. Certainly a case can be made that such theorizing increases our understanding of governance in general, but a link to “adaptation” is much less obvious and deserves a thorough discussion if it is to be presented as the central theme of the book.