Accountability, transformative learning, and alternate futures for New England groundfish catch shares

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1. Introduction

After centuries of harvest, the New England groundfishery is an official disaster. Following 2010 implementation of market-based catch shares, federal managers issued the disaster declaration in 2012 and the US Congress authorized relief funding in 2014. Persistent fishery decline raises concerns about the relationship between accountability and adaptive learning. Existing research demonstrates that environmental complexity heightens the need for governance structures that foster transformative capacity and adaptive social learning across socio-ecological scales. Other literatures question the value of audit-based standards of accountability favored by neoliberal policy, and offer inclusive and participatory modes of democratic decision-making as possible remedies. This paper outlines problems with audit-based accountability mechanisms that discourage transformative learning by narrowing the scope of public debate in the groundfish case. It further considers an emerging proposal for governance innovation, one offering polycentric venues for vigorous public discourse as routes to more adaptive learning and accountability. Specifically, broader integration of socio-ecological knowledge accumulated by fisherfolk could reverse a dearth of locally-scaled information in regionally-administered catch share policy and stimulate more agonistic, or multi-polar, discussion. Although full implementation would require additional development, an insider-outsider activist strategy is advancing policy reform and grassroots community organizing around alternate visions.

2. Transformation, learning and accountability

Humans are inherently social; they learn from one another, not in a vacuum. Adaptation to dramatic change further requires not only refinement of routine operations, in single-loop social learning, but evaluation of deeply held assumptions and longstanding organizational models, in multiple-loop or transformative social learning. The flow of information among decision-makers can alter these prospects. A diversity of perspectives and associated opinions, expressed in a mutually respectful manner, can augment our ability to envision alternate futures. By contrast, if deliberations are persistently compartmentalized such that some viewpoints are eliminated by suppression or inadvertent exclusion, resulting decisions may be deficient in analytical rigor or political viability.

Scholars increasingly assert related critiques of prevailing

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bureaucratic approaches to accountability. Audit-based account-
ability mechanisms, including quantitative performance thresh-
olds popular in neoliberal regimes, may protect bureaucrats
against a relatively narrow suite of well-documented risks and
insulate them from intra-agency criticism, yet fail to consider a
broader array of public risks that are less clearly recognized or
harder to quantify [7,8,13]. A simplistic emphasis on outcomes and
reporting can displace professional ethics around due process and
moral conduct, e.g., routinized achievement of minimum stand-
dards may deflect agency attention away from more nuanced
shifts in public priorities [6,14]. If such standards become syn-
chronized with staff performance reviews, vertical hierarchies fa-
cilitate strategic movement of information down a chain of com-
mand, as is operationally efficient in a static decision environment.
Less helpfully, however, such arrangements can encourage ad-
ministrative stovepipes that prevent the lateral and upward
sharing of information that might otherwise spur innovation [15].
Similarly, social divides between organizational insiders and out-
siders can sideline perspectives that have broad social utility but
do not serve short term interests of insiders [16]. These tradeoffs
between internal efficiency and public benefits become particu-
larly problematic if socio-ecological complexity requires transfor-

By contrast, in polycentric, broadly participatory social struc-
tures, multiple decision centers at varied scales can allow multi-
directional flows of information and accountability, including lat-
erally and upward [16–19]. While any associated contestation be-
tween decision-makers around knowledge claims or jurisdictional
authority may appear administratively inefficient over short time
frames, in the longer term, if integrated with mechanisms for broad
accountability, such negotiations can advance collective benefits by stimulating public debate around existing assumptions and patterns and offering diverse alternatives to outmoded pol-
cies [3,15,16]. Some political theorists therefore call for decren-
talized notions of accountability wherein ample opportunities for civic participation and inter-organizational scrutiny ensure that active engagement with public concerns around values and ethics becomes a professional norm [9,15]. In particular, Chantal Mouffe
proposes agonism or agonistic pluralism, advocating vigorous but
mutually respectful debate among adversaries as a permanent
condition of democracy, and thereby rejecting both neoliberal
faith in voting as summative aggregation of individual preferences and utopian ideals of consensus [12].

This paper explores these arguments as they manifest in the
groundfishery of the northeastern United States. Following brief
coverage of methodology and legal case context, it discusses fail-
ures of catch shares as implemented pursuant to a neoliberal
policy agenda. These include continued depletion of fish popula-
tions, industry consolidation, and disenfranchisement of coastal
fishing communities, as well as apparent regulatory violations, a
narrowing of public discourse, and marginalization of dissenting
voices. The paper then considers an ongoing effort by coastal
fisherfolk and their supporters to develop more robust policy alter-
atives. Significantly, this latter work involves both investments
within existing governance structures and mobilization of broader
citals: an insider-outsider strategy. To demonstrate this, the
following sections trace a brief policy history, consider the techno-
ological and socio-political positions of policy critics, and de-
scribe efforts to interject alternate viewpoints into a central de-
cision-making venue. Evidence reveals substantial barriers that
prevent such sharing of more diversified information and op-
ions. Nonetheless, small boat representatives and advocates persist in raising key concerns among audiences across local to
international scales. They have attracted support for a still-evol-
ving proposal to reform fishery decision-making through decen-
tralized structures for learning and accountability. These efforts
have the potential to blur distinctions between governance ins-
siders and outsiders, an outcome that could have broader utility
for reformation of the neoliberal regime.

3. Methods and case overview

The following discussion takes a modified grounded theory or
constant comparative approach whereby data collection and
analysis iterate between synthesis of existing research and com-
parison with ongoing fieldwork [20]. Formal data collection by the
lead author has involved a series of overlapping projects in New
England fisheries, all of which inform the present analysis, either
directly or indirectly. These projects incorporated periods of par-
ticipant observation from 1990 to 2016, including attendance at
more than 40 meetings and workshops focused on fishery man-
agement and ranging in length from one hour to four days. They
also included more than 175 interviews with more than 200 in-
formants, mostly fishermen, but also fishery managers, NGO staff,
and others involved in the fishing industry. In addition, 95 phone,
mail, or internet surveys collected by the lead author conveyed
information about the experiences, perceptions, decisions, and
actions of fishermen as they relate to fishery management, fish-
ed ecosystems, and the social context of fishing. Review of documents
and website content produced by government, news media, NGOs,
and trade organizations also provided essential information. Ad-
ditionally, among the four co-authors, experiential field observa-
tion as non-academic marine policy professionals totals more than
60 years.

Our case includes historic New England groundfishing ports and
associated management discussions from local to federal le-
vels. Over centuries, boats homeported in dozens of harbors from
the Canadian border to the mid-Atlantic US states deployed hooks
or nets to catch bottom-dwelling finfish such as cod, haddock,
halibut, flounders, pollock, hake, whiting, and redfish in the waters
of the northwest Atlantic. Today, the remaining industry has
concentrated into two Massachusetts ports: Gloucester and New
Bedford. Our study focuses more on eastern Maine, where the
fishery declined decades ago and local groups have organized to
propose collectivist strategies for the recovery of both fish popu-
lations and fishery access.

4. Policy failure

The federally-managed New England groundfishery has ex-
perienced a gradual encroachment of neoliberal policy, despite
widespread opposition at the grassroots [21]. Audit-based ac-
countability mechanisms have become entrenched, regardless of
their apparent ineffectiveness. The following paragraphs trace this
history and some of its problematic outcomes. They illustrate how
groundfish policy manifests four decades of faith among govern-
ment officials that the predictive capabilities of fisheries science
coupled with the economic engine of private property will pro-
duce socially optimal outcomes, even as decision-makers dis-
regard dissenting voices.

In 1976, after expelling foreign fishing fleets from its 200 mile
EEZ, the US Congress allocated funds to incentivize domestic in-
vestment, optimistic that increasingly quantitative biological as-
sessment techniques could sustain an economic boom by de-
termining maximum sustainable yield (MSY) and regulatory stra-
egies to achieve it. Total allowable catches (TACs) calculated in
relation to sustainable yield seemed to offer clear standards for
accountability audits, targets against which to compare manage-
ment outcomes. Congress also created eight Regional Councils to
advise the US National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration

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