

Master's Thesis



**Fishing For Common Ground:  
Broadening the Definition of 'Rights-based' Fisheries  
Management in Iceland's Westfjords**

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*Fishing For Common Ground: Broadening the Definition of 'Rights-based' Fisheries Management in Iceland's Westfjords*

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## **Declaration**

I hereby confirm that I am the sole author of this thesis and it is a product of my own academic research.

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# Abstract

Since the 1980s, so-called “rights-based” fisheries management regimes – specifically those designed to apply market forces to problems of inefficiency and overfishing by divvying up fixed, tradable proportions of a total allowable catch among individuals or cooperatives – have become both one of the most widely advocated and most contentious aspects of marine resource management. Iceland, promoted by some as a successful international model of this approach, has been the site – for nearly thirty years – of fierce debate and controversy regarding the system’s effects on regional development, social justice and wealth disparity. This thesis uses a phenomenological approach, a set of ten semi-structured interviews, and document analysis to explore how inhabitants of the Icelandic Westfjords understand and articulate their ‘rights’ in the context of fisheries management, particularly in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis. Respondents discuss a range of perceived ‘rights’ not usually considered in management design, most notably the right to ‘fate-control’. Discussions of rights-based management in the Westfjords reflect deeper concerns regarding identity, fear of change, democratic values and a sense of personal agency.

*For the 'fishing communities' I love – in Maine, Senegal  
and the Westfjords*

# Foreword

When I first arrived in the Westfjords in September of 2011, I had no idea what the next ten months would bring. I arrived in Ísafjörður jet lagged and slightly nervous - awed by both the landscape and the Icelandic language, which seemed to consist of guttural sounds and vowels I had never heard before. I knew no one. And yet I felt immediately at home. The Westfjords' jagged coastline (although backed by mountains) reminded me of the coast of Maine, where I had spent most of the last six years. The fishing boats docked in the harbor, the smell of salt and fish – it all reminded me of towns I had known and loved. As the months went by, I became fascinated by the Icelandic ITQ system, and by the way such a seemingly obscure and mind-numbing topic could simmer so relentlessly beneath the surface of society for three decades. Later that year, I learned that New England had decided to institute a similar system for its groundfisheries – prompting expressions of distrust, fear and hope in small Maine communities that echoed what I had heard in the Westfjords; yet another thing shared by two very different places, both of which I had grown to love. Immediately, I knew I wanted to study perceptions of the ITQ system in the Westfjords so that I could better understand New England as it began its transition to rights-based management. I hope that fishing communities in both places can continue to thrive for many years to come.

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# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Introduction to 'rights-based management'

Discussions of rights, ownership and privatization dominate modern fisheries management literature (e.g. Macinko and Bromley, 2002, 2004; Hannesson, 2004; Grafton et al. 2006; Beddington et al. 2007; Costello, Gaines and Lynham, 2008; Bromley 2009; Pitcher and Lam 2010). The term 'rights-based management' applies to a broad range of regulatory regimes that seek to address perceived problems of inefficiency and overharvesting by granting certain fixed 'rights' to fishery participants – either on the basis of territorial control or an assigned catch quota (e.g. Christy, 1996; Arnason, 1993). Certain of these arrangements – particularly Individual Transferable Quota (ITQ) systems – allow allocated quota shares to be traded amongst participants, theoretically fostering economic efficiency, producing greater profits, and decreasing the risk of overfishing (Arnason, 1993, 2008; Christy, 1996; Scott, 1986; Eythórsson, 1996; Costello et al., 2008). Since the mid-1970s, approximately 150 major fisheries throughout the world have established such systems (Sabau, 2011) – widening and deepening the role of markets in managing natural resources.

Despite enthusiasm amongst some scholars and practitioners, ITQ systems also face a great deal of criticism – much of it related to their social and economic impacts on individuals and communities. Transferability often predictably gives rise to industry consolidation - an effect that is in many ways anticipated, but can also come at the expense of small-scale fishery participants and have potentially negative effects on coastal communities (GAO, 2004; Macinko and Bromley, 2002; Benediktsson and Karlsdóttir, 2011; Skaptadóttir, 2000; Pálsson and Helgason, 1995; Apostle et al., 1998). ITQ systems have also given rise to disputes over related – though less quantifiable – issues such as fairness, social justice, and human rights (Macinko, 1993; Bromley, 2009; Einarsson, 2011). Allocating quota shares to individuals in the context of fisheries historically and culturally understood as 'common resources' can raise contentious objections from those who perceive an unfair 'gifting' of public resources to certain, privileged individuals (Bromley, 2009; Einarsson, 2011). Today, rights-based management systems – along with the complex and contentious issues of privatization and social justice they raise – lie at the heart of what has become one of the predominant issues in international fisheries policy: “the so-called ‘property rights’ debate” (Charles, 1992: 386).

## 1.2 Rights-based fisheries management in Iceland: An ongoing saga

For some time, Iceland – a relatively small island nation in the North Atlantic – has been at the center of this debate. In 1990, the Icelandic Fisheries Management Act (FMA) extended an ITQ system to all of the country’s major commercial stocks – making Iceland one of the first nations in the world to apply widespread use of the ITQ model. In basic terms, the system allocated fixed proportional shares of an annual Total Allowable Catch (TAC) to individual vessels based on their catch history during the three years leading up to the system’s initial introduction. Vessel owners – whether individuals or companies - could then fish their annual allotment and/or exchange their quota shares on a market. (The structure and development of Iceland’s ITQ system will be discussed in further detail in Chapter 4).

In some circles, Iceland has been promoted as an international model of successful fisheries management – having reduced overcapitalization, increased efficiency within the industry, and created substantial profits that helped fuel the rise of the country’s financial and service sectors (e.g. Arnason, 2008; Gissurarson, 2000) (See Chapter 4). An article published in *The Economist* in 2008 declared that the country’s ITQ system represented “a model way to catch and keep fish.” It is “clear, open and fairly simple, and it is well policed,” the article continued. “It thus enjoys the respect of fishermen. And it is based, crucially, upon scientists’ assessments of stocks, not politicians’ calculations of electoral advantage” (Anon. 2008; cited in Sabau, 2011).

The ITQ system has also been the subject, however, of nearly thirty years of fierce debate and controversy regarding its effects on regional development, social justice and wealth disparity (Skaptadóttir, 2000; Eythórsson, 2000; Pálsson and Helgason, 1996). To some, the subject of fisheries management may seem incredibly dull, wrote Helgason (2011) in *The Reykjavik Grapevine*, “but it is always simmering under the surface of Icelandic society.” From the very moment of its implementation, argue Benediktsson and Karlsdóttir (2011), the ITQ system has been “one of the most divisive issues” in the country (pp. 233), drawing criticism not only from Icelanders, but also from international organizations. In October 2011, the United Nations Human Rights Committee declared Iceland’s 1990 Fisheries Management Act (FMA) to be a violation of human rights – a surprising critique of a nation commonly perceived to a cohesive and relatively progressive democratic society (Einarsson, 2011).

Concerns regarding the impacts and fundamental fairness of the ITQ system have further intensified since the collapse of Iceland’s financial sector in 2008 – an event which many have linked to the evolution of transferable fishing rights as financial assets (Gylfason et al., 2009; Benediktsson and Karlsdóttir, 2011; Einarsson, 2011).

A significant portion of the national discourse regarding this ongoing controversy has focused on the rural region of the Westfjords, located in the northwest corner of the island [Figure 1]. This area - characterized by small, relatively isolated villages located on the shores of deep fjords – has historically had a particularly pronounced dependence on fisheries (Icelandic Ministry of Fisheries and Agriculture, Economy, n.d.) and has also been one of the areas most significantly impacted by changes in fisheries management (Skaptadóttir 2007; 2000; 2004).



*Figure 1 The Westfjords region of Iceland. Source: Google Maps (2010). [Iceland].*

### **1.3 Research questions**

In recent decades, the term ‘rights-based fishing’ has been applied to a wide range of management systems – including ITQs – that seek to use access rights and allocation to address issues such as overfishing and overcapitalization. There are those who argue, however, that this approach – along with the literature that supports it – have reduced the notion of ‘rights’ to a limited conception of *property* rights, thereby constraining the scope of the debate. “There is no better evidence of collapse in conceptual capacity,” writes Macinko

(1993), “nor of the spread of this loss, than the ubiquitous phrase ‘rights-based fishing’,” (pp. 948). A discourse that applies the phrase to only a certain kind of ‘right’ limits the working definition of the word, as well as our understanding of management and its effectiveness, and too narrowly frames the entire discussion within a certain contextual understanding that potentially ignores important elements of public opinion.

Building on work done by social researchers such as – but not limited to - Karlsdóttir (2008), Durrenberger (1996), Einarsson (2011), Matthíasson (1997), Skaptadóttir (2000, 2007) and Pálsson (1991, 1990, 1998), this thesis uses a qualitative empirical perspective to pose a set of related questions examining perceptions of the Icelandic ITQ system among respondents in three Westfjords communities. At its most general level, this study seeks to explore how respondents understand and articulate ambiguous and contentious concepts such as ‘rights’ and ‘ownership’ in the context of fisheries. Although the literature surrounding ‘rights-based’ management regimes often focuses on ‘rights’ in the context of property and access (Arnason, 1993; 1995; 2008; Christy, 1996; Gissurarson, 2000), Macinko (1993) notes that “expectations associated with property are as much a state of mind and practice as they are a product of law” (pp. 947). ‘Rights’ – as a legal concept – serve as the foundation of the ITQ system and refer to a legally sanctioned and protected set of claims to shares of a resource. In a more colloquial sense, however, the word can also be used to reference moral, social and traditional rights perceived by inhabitants and embedded within a culture or community. This research seeks to identify and understand the ways in which a range of inhabitants of selected Westfjords communities – including non-fishers – articulate and understand their ‘rights’, as well as how those understandings impact their perceptions of the ITQ system’s fairness and legitimacy, particularly in the context of political debate and economic upheaval following the 2008 financial crisis. In an effort to answer this question, this thesis relies on a number of sub-questions. First, what do fisheries mean to respondents? Second, how do respondents understand the Icelandic ITQ system and its impacts? And finally, what kinds of ‘rights’ do respondents identify at various scales (i.e. national, regional, individual)?

## **1.4 Purpose of thesis**

### **1.4.1 Contribute to filling a ‘cartographic silence’**

St. Martin and Hall-Arber (2009), writing about the importance of understanding the largely undocumented ‘social landscape’ of fisheries and fishing communities, contend that despite

increasing use of spatial analysis in fisheries management, a ‘cartographic silence’ exists within current mappings of the marine environment that ignores vital elements like community dependence on certain areas, territorial claims and local knowledge. To address this, they have begun engaging with fishers in New England and elsewhere to create maps that integrate these factors. This thesis seeks to address a different kind of ‘cartographic silence’ – located in conceptual rather than geographic space – by exploring and creating a different kind of (non-geographical) map: a map of ‘rights’ as perceived and understood by community members. Mapping and identifying the gaps between fisheries management and perceptions of social reality can potentially enlarge and deepen the discussion of available and appropriate policy solutions.

That being said, it is both important and difficult to differentiate between ‘rights’ and ‘interests’. As Macinko and Bromley (2004) explain, rights are “enforceable claims... We can all run around making claims (and do), but only those claims that society elects to sanction (enforce) are rights,” (pp. 658). Just because individuals or certain elements of a population consider something to be a ‘right’ clearly doesn’t mean that society should – or will – choose to make it enforceable. As Hardin (1972) stated: “Beyond the limits of his confining skin, no man can own anything. ‘Property refers not to things owned but to the rights granted by society; they must periodically be re-examined in the light of social justice,” (pp. 172). This research seeks merely to identify and discuss those things that respondents consider a ‘right’; the next step will be to decide whether (and how) to incorporate those perceptions into management.

#### **1.4.2 Contribute to understanding a ‘particularly wicked’ problem**

Jentoft and Chuenpagdee (2009) describe conflicts in fisheries as an example of so-called ‘wicked problems’ in resource management. Fisheries, they argue, are “particularly wicked” given the inherent complexity of the issues involved, the multiplicity of conflicting stakeholder interests, and the difficulty of defining goals and identifying solutions. They contend that a major component of this ‘wickedness’ is the fact that fisheries conflicts often involve complex social values rather than clear-cut biological facts:

“They necessitate complex ethical and philosophical considerations. They also require a different knowledge than the one of experts: a practical, ethical, contextual and experience-based knowledge... Science can of course

help along the way, but science alone cannot provide the answers to questions of which values, norms and principles should be applied in real-world governance,” (pp. 555).

Issues involving property rights and privatization are particularly difficult, especially when embedded in a context in which definitions of ownership and control have been ambiguous and contested. The understanding and application of property rights involve not only legal issues, but social ones as well. Property rights represent, argues Kennedy (2011), “complex relations of reciprocal rights and duties among people with respect to things,” (pp. 26), and therefore involve not only social, but also deeply personal values and perceptions. Given this inherent social complexity, Jentoft and Chuenpagdee (2009) contend that the process for addressing wicked problems necessarily involves communication and learning among stakeholders, “where norms and values are played out and where different ethics, ideologies, and epistemologies are active,” (pp. 555). This thesis seeks to use the voices of stakeholders to analyze articulations and understandings of ambiguous – yet vitally important – concepts like ‘property’, ‘ownership’ and ‘fairness’. The complexity and diversity of human reaction to various management ‘solutions’, write Jentoft and Chuenpagdee (2009), reflect the fact that “management tools come with ideologies; they are not value free,” (pp. 556). This thesis, by exploring respondents’ reactions to the ITQ system, seeks to contribute to framing – and perhaps better understanding – a problem that has been ‘wicked’ for nearly thirty years.

### **1.4.3 Highlight the agency of individuals and communities**

An additional benefit to this kind of research is its ability to illuminate and emphasize the agency of individuals and communities often considered in the literature mainly as passive sites of impact. Although ITQ systems – including the Icelandic case – do entail social effects, rural communities and inhabitants are not just victims; they also have the ability to act, react and resist (Flint and Luloff, 2005; Brookfield et al., 2005; Perry and Sumalia, 2007). As Olson (2005) writes:

“The tendency to look at communities as simply the places that get impacted plays down their contexts and histories and brackets anthropology to the description of impacts. This loses those more proactive senses of them, and renders less visible the multiplicities of interests, positions, and values in any given community,” (pp. 249).

Such oversimplification, she argues, “misses the creative and meaningful agency of community members” – as well as the concerns, knowledge and practices they can bring to fisheries management (pp. 254). Although criticism of market-based management regimes often focuses on the perceived negative effects such systems have on small, particularly rural communities, there are other ways to understand and present the situation.

St. Martin (2009) notes that Popper and Popper (1999), rather than using “the statistics of bank closures, industrial decline, environmental degradation, and depopulation to document capitalism’s unevenness, its environmentally induced crises, or its victimization of local people” in the Great Plains, used the same data to tell the story of a “commons becoming”. In much the same way, one could look at Westfjords communities in terms of loss and negative impact, or in terms of development, adaptation, and resistance. Examining the context and consequences (both intended and unintended) of such resistance, write Heynen and Robbins (2005), may open the door for “further resistance, community, and the restoration of a people’s nature,” (pp. 7). This study attempts to use a nuanced analysis of individual responses and attitudes to break free of the tendency to focus only on loss and impact, and to contribute instead to highlighting the perspective and agency of individuals and communities, as well as the opportunity such a shift provides for public engagement.

## **1.5 Structure and contents**

The structure of this thesis seeks to interweave secondary analysis and research with respondents’ accounts, thereby embedding their perceptions of ‘rights’ and legitimacy within an academic, historical and social context. Chapter 2 outlines the methodology used to gather and analyze data. Chapters Three and Four provide background information and a review of related literature: Chapter Three describes the development of rights-based fisheries management, as well as the academic discourse that surrounds it, while Chapter Four focuses on the history of fisheries management in Iceland and the academic literature regarding the ongoing controversy over the country’s ITQ system. The five chapters that follow organize respondents’ discussions into major themes. Chapter Five explores what Icelandic fisheries represent to respondents, suggesting that respondents perceive fisheries as providing a sense of temporal and geographic ‘rootedness’, connecting them to the past, as well as to physical places and the communities they inhabit. They also link fisheries to the formation of identity, suggesting specifically that fisheries shape a sense of self-sufficiency, independence and

freedom at personal, regional and national scales. Chapter 6 examines the ways in which respondents perceive and articulate the impacts of the ITQ system, highlighting in particular their emphasis on the ways in which the system has affected the ability of individuals to influence the future. Chapter 7 discusses the various kinds of ‘rights’ identified by respondents; these rights go beyond traditional notions of access and control to include perceived rights to individual freedom, a ‘free market’, and the ability to participate in a democratic process. Finally, Chapter 8 suggests that ultimately, respondents’ narratives indicate above all the importance of a perceived right to so-called ‘fate control’, and discusses the implications and potential applications of including this particular right in a broader definition of ‘rights-based management’.

## 2 Methods

This chapter explains the qualitative empirical approaches used to both gather and analyze data in this study. The research employed a series of in-depth semi-structured interviews in an effort to illuminate and explore attitudes towards ITQ fisheries management and conceptions of ‘rights’ in several small communities in the Westfjords region of Iceland. Although it also used a wide range of secondary historical, economic, anthropological and social research to extrapolate and link responses to broader themes and patterns, this study is clearly not meant to make conclusions regarding either the full range or depth of opinion within the Westfjords, but simply to highlight and explore perceptions and experiences at a more personal level.

### 2.1 Phenomenology

Because this study focuses on individuals’ perceptions, it approaches the ITQ system not merely as a set of fisheries regulations, but as an ongoing *experience* – lived by Icelanders, especially those in small coastal villages, in terms of allocation, community impacts and changes in social structure. In order to reflect and understand this ‘ITQ experience’, this research employed the phenomenological method. Phenomenology focuses on individuals’ interpretations of their experiences, as understood and transmitted through the stories or ‘personal experience narratives’ they share (Denzin, 1989). Such narratives, although personally constructed, exist “independent of the life of the storyteller or narrator” (Denzin, 1989: 41), and reflect the ways in which members of a society continually interpret their social order (Smith, 2004; Gubrium and Holstein, 1997; Creswell, 1997). Rather than focusing on ‘actual’ events and experiences, phenomenology seeks instead to more fully understand individuals’ interpretations of experiences as reflected in personal narratives, along with the constructed meanings they convey (Gubrium and Holstein, 1997). This method makes particular sense in the context of seeking to understand individuals’ perceptions of ‘rights’ and the legitimacy and impact of the Icelandic ITQ system, since such concepts are subjective notions that reflect individuals’ personal histories, experiences, and world-views.

Researchers have identified a number of matters relevant to the focus of this study that can be gleaned from such narratives. According to Shanahan et al. (1999), individuals often construct narratives in ways that convey particular lessons or morals – made evident in the ways people situate themselves in the story or in how they portray certain characters. In other words, there

is always a point to telling a story, as these narratives say something about who the storyteller is and what values and events they consider important (Burley, 2006). Variations in narratives reflect differences in experience between individuals, highlighting the heterogeneity of perception and understanding that can exist even within small, seemingly homogenous communities like those in the Westfjords (Burley, 2006). Beyond the individual, narratives can also reflect or construct group values (Denzin, 1989), conceptions of shared identity and culture, and understandings of social elements like gender and class in a particular context (Cantrill, 1998). The phenomenological method encourages respondents to share personal narratives by discussing events and telling stories from their own lives, revealing in the process the symbolic meaning they associate with certain experiences (Shanahan et al., 1999; Cantrill, 1998).

## **2.2 Defining 'Fishing Communities'**

Because this study seeks to explore perceptions of rights and the ITQ system among inhabitants of certain 'fishing communities' in the Westfjords region, the meaning of that term first had to be defined. The concept of 'community' is fluid – a “culturally contingent notion” (Creed, 2004: 57) that can mean various things to various people in particular geographic, social, and historical contexts (Pálsson, 1991; Apostle et al., 1998; Clay and Olson, 2008). The boundaries and significance of so-called 'fishing communities' are perhaps even more complex. Communities with geographically distinct boundaries (i.e. island communities or remote communities) are generally easier to define, while others can be significantly more vague - or perhaps not based on geography at all (i.e. communities of fishermen who use similar gear) (GAO, 2004). Additional complexity stems from social factors “not easily reduced to statistics on permits, landings and fish-themed icons” (Clay and Olson, 2008: 147). Understanding a 'community' involves nuanced and continuously changing notions of place, economy and identity (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983), defined by ideas that shift temporally, geographically and between individual members.

Within fishing communities themselves there exists wide social variability reflecting institutional structure (Apostle et al., 1998), gender (Davis and Wagner, 2006; Skaptadóttir, 2000), elements of ethnicity and class (LiPuma and Meltzoff, 1997; Kitner, 2006) and labor relations (Kaplan, 1999). In order to reflect this inherent and dynamic complexity, Sepez et al. (2006) advocate “slipping the chains of the bounded community” (pp. 291) to analyze

locations in a way that recognizes intra-community heterogeneity. The tendency to discuss fishing ‘communities’ as monolithic and largely homogenous papers over and obscures the agency and perspective of individuals, masking what is perhaps an obvious reality: that any ‘community’ contains conflicting opinions and opposing narratives.

For the purposes of this study, the term ‘fishing community’ is used primarily in a geographic sense, referring specifically to several small and geographically distinct villages in the Westfjords near the region’s largest town: Ísafjörður [Figure 2]. As noted by the GAO (2004), ‘community’ is somewhat easier to define – or at least more straightforward – in rural locations like the Westfjords, where small villages are still relatively remote from one another due to a combination of mountainous terrain, treacherous winter weather and limited transportation infrastructure. Respondents in this study inhabit several such communities, including: Ísafjörður, Bolungarvík and Flateyri [Figure 3]. Two additional respondents currently reside in Reykjavík (the nation’s capital, located in the southwest). Although they do not live in the Westfjords, they work in positions relevant to this study; their views and experiences were used to provide additional depth and range to the research.



**Figure 2** Area of study surrounding the town of Ísafjörður in the Westfjords. Source: Google Maps (2010). [Westfjords].



**Figure 3** Communities in which Westfjords respondents live: Ísafjörður (including Hnífsdalur), Bolungarvík and Flateyri. Source: Google Maps (2010). [Ísafjarðardjúp].

The Westfjords region – its topography characterized by a jagged coastline and steep mountain ranges that rise from the sea – contains a number of relatively small, geographically isolated villages similar to those in which respondents reside. Of the three communities discussed in this study, Ísafjörður is the largest, with a population of just over 2600 in 2012; Bolungarvík has a population of approximately 866, and Flateyri has just 214 (City Population, 2012). Ísafjörður includes a domestic airport offering twice-daily flights to Reykjavík. Both Bolungarvík and Flateyri are connected to Ísafjörður via road. A tunnel through the mountains facilitates travel between Ísafjörður and Flateyri, although making the trip in winter can still be treacherous – and sometimes even impossible. Each of these communities – much like others in the region – came into being in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when Icelanders saw new opportunity in fisheries and made a great exodus from farming regions to coastal areas. The location of Westfjords villages, often on narrow areas of lowland at the base of mountains – or on spits of land jutting out into the fjords, reflects the history of their development as fishing outposts when boats were small and proximity to productive fishing grounds was of primary importance (Skaptadóttir, 2007; see Chapter 4).

## **2.3 Selecting Respondent Pool**

In order to attain a range of perspectives, I sought to interview respondents with a variety of roles, positions, and experiences. In the process, I quickly discovered that even those respondents with little or no direct link to the fishing industry constructed personal narratives reflecting a conception of life and identity both distinctly and intimately entwined with fish and fisheries.

### **2.3.1 Defining 'stakeholder'**

Although scholars have examined extra-legal, cultural conceptions of 'rights' among fishers in other parts of the world (e.g. Acheson, 1981; 1975), this study focuses on a broader range of stakeholders that extends beyond the fishers themselves to include other community members. The tendency exists within some strands of fisheries management, particularly economics, to focus almost entirely on fishers as the ultimate stakeholders – arguing that including perspectives from the broader community only confuses things (Hannesson, 2004). Others argue, however, that sidelining the voices of those who do not directly participate in the fishing industry ignores a vast and vital portion of the population – especially in a region like the Westfjords, where the small size of communities, the economic importance of fisheries, a relative lack of economic diversification, and a cultural perception of fisheries as a public good, means that everyone is – to some degree – a stakeholder (Einarsson, 2011).

This does of course add a significant degree of complexity, since the perspectives individuals bring to fisheries management are colored by different life experiences. This is in all likelihood outweighed, however, by the value inherent in including these disparate and often overlooked voices. Because I consider all inhabitants of these villages to be stakeholders with experiences and perspectives relevant to the study, I spoke with anyone available and willing to participate. I made initial contacts through friends and acquaintances who provided me with the names, email addresses and phone numbers of individuals they thought might be interested in participating. This so-called 'snowball' sampling method allowed me to identify a relatively broad list of potential interviewees.

### **2.3.2 Limitations**

Limitations are inherent to research design; one cannot, for example, interview all relevant people in depth (Marshall and Rossman, 2006). In this case, my inability to speak Icelandic unfortunately further limited the pool of potential respondents to those individuals able to speak English – and to those confident enough in their English ability to interact with a native speaker. For example, although I attempted several times to contact independent small-boat fishers in the Westfjords, I received only one response, in which the individual confessed that he spoke very little English and did not feel comfortable discussing the issue. Because independent small-boat fishers clearly have unique and important perspectives on the perceived fairness and legitimacy of the ITQ system, I attempted to fill the gap by talking to two individuals in Reykjavík representing various sectors of the Icelandic small-boat fleet – both those who hold and do not hold quota. Although their views do not necessarily represent those of fishers in the Westfjords, their opinions and experiences do open a window into relevant perspectives, as well as elements of what is important and at stake for small-scale fishermen.

Although snowballing carries with it a risk of generating a relatively homogenous sample, I took efforts to avoid this by ensuring that I contacted individuals with varied levels of involvement in the fisheries, of various ages, and in several different villages. Unfortunately, I had less success achieving variation by gender and nationality. Only two of the respondents are women, although scholars have documented the oft-overlooked importance of women as fishers, stakeholders and influential members of Icelandic fishing communities (e.g. Skaptadóttir, 2000). I also did not manage to interview any recent immigrants, which would have added depth and diversity to the sample; unfortunately, none of the non-Icelanders I approached were willing to discuss the topic of fisheries management.

The respondent pool was also limited to those individuals willing to discuss contentious issues with an outsider. Because the topic of ITQ fisheries management has significant political implications (Einarsson, 2011; Helgason, 2011) and because it involves issues of social division, wealth, and ‘fairness’ (e.g. Benediktsson and Karlsdóttir, 2011; Helgason and Pálsson, 1997; Skaptadóttir, 2000), certain individuals may have been uncomfortable sharing their opinions with any researcher, particularly a foreigner. There may also, however, have been potential benefits to my status as a foreigner and relative outsider (I had lived in the

Westfjords for approximately one year at the time of research). Indeed, as one of the respondents noted, the issue of ITQ management is so contentious and the villages in the Westfjords are so small and tightly knit, that villagers often hesitate to reveal their true opinions to other community members for fear of offending them:

“Because, you know, we are discussing it in our own minds and to our own likings, but when we come to groups... we don’t say things, you know. Because we know each other here... So we try to take care not to offend maybe a guy who is married to my sister, or whatever.”

This respondent suggested that I, as an outsider, represented – to him, at least - a safer sounding board for a more honest response.

### **2.3.3 List of Respondents**

Ultimately, I conducted in-depth interviews with a total of ten respondents (Table 1). Due to the sensitive and/or political nature of some of the topics discussed, several individuals requested that I keep their identities hidden. The group of respondents also included a public official. As Einarsson (2011) notes, because the viability of small municipalities depends to a great extent on quota holders and fishing companies, “understandably, the officials running the municipalities are in a vulnerable position against the demands and directives of the powerful quota holders, their families and allies” (pp. 22). In the interest of protecting the reputations and privacy of everyone involved, I chose to assign all respondents pseudonyms for the purposes of research and discussion – hoping that this enabled respondents to speak more candidly about personal experiences, opinions, and observations.

*Table 1 List of Respondents*

	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Community</b>	<b>Stakeholder Status</b>
<b>Respondent A</b>	F	Ísafjörður	Fish processing
<b>Respondent B</b>	M	Ísafjörður	Ex-fisher; family history of involvement in fishing/fish processing
<b>Respondent C</b>	M	Ísafjörður	Fishing gear / imports
<b>Respondent D</b>	M	Bolungarvík	Public official
<b>Respondent E</b>	M	Hnífsdalur (Ísafjörður)	Large fishing factory; Family history of involvement in fishing/fish processing
<b>Respondent F</b>	M	Flateyri	Family history of involvement in fishing/fish processing
<b>Respondent G</b>	M	Ísafjörður	Biologist
<b>Respondent H</b>	F	Flateyri	Family history of involvement in fishing/fish processing
<b>Respondent I</b>	M	Reykjavík	Samtök íslenskra fiskimanna (Icelandic Fishermen's Association)
<b>Respondent J</b>	M	Reykjavík	Landssamband smabataeigenda (National Association of Small Boat Owners)

Once a potential respondent expressed willingness to participate, I provided him/her with a letter containing background information and a brief description of the context of my research – along with Icelandic translations of certain key phrases.

## **2.4 Conducting interviews**

This study employed a phenomenological interview method that encouraged respondents to construct narratives demonstrating how they understand and experience legitimacy and rights in the context of fisheries and the ITQ system. Marshall and Rossman (2006) state that qualitative approaches “are uniquely suited to uncovering the unexpected and exploring new avenues.” This, however, demands flexibility and adaptability, since the concepts and questions most relevant to the topic of study are often discovered during the research process

itself. A semi-structured, in-depth interview method allowed for a more thorough investigation and discussion of issues raised by the respondents themselves (Gubrium and Holstein, 1997).

Because this research deals with individuals' perceptions, understandings and constructions of events and ideas, I attempted to design my interview questions in a way that did not artificially provide a frame of reference for their experiences. Although the subject always has an idea of what the researcher is trying to achieve (Burley, 2006), a respondent's perspective should unfold as he or she – not the researcher - views it (Marshall and Rossman, 2006). Accordingly, I tried to ask questions in ways that encouraged respondents to focus on the issues most important to them, and allowed them the freedom to bring up additional subjects of interest. For example, I approached interviewees explaining that I wanted to talk about the ITQ system and its effects on life in the Westfjords; almost all respondents brought up issues of fairness, justice and identity on their own – demonstrating the important role those topics play in their understandings of the ITQ experience. I conducted ten interviews in November and December of 2011 in Ísafjörður, Hnífsdalur, Flateyri, Bolungarvík and Reykjavík – each lasting between 1.5 and 3 hours. Although most of the interviews were conducted in the homes or offices of respondents, two occurred in cafés, and two at the University Centre of the Westfjords. In each instance, I made an audio recording of the interview upon receiving permission from the respondent.

#### **2.4.1 Limitations**

Limitations of the chosen interview method include the possibility that participants may be unwilling or uncomfortable sharing certain information. In addition, the interviewer may not ask questions that evoke long narratives, whether because of a lack of experience and familiarity, or because the participant has chosen not to share certain information (Marshall and Rossman, 2006). Another risk is that the researcher may impose bias through either the phrasing of questions or the interpretation of answers; the quality of the data therefore depends on interpersonal skills and contextual understanding (Marshall and Rossman, 2006). In order to minimize the negative impacts of these limitations, I conducted extensive secondary research before beginning the interview process and edited interview questions thoroughly and repeatedly beforehand for signs of bias.

## **2.5 Transcription & analysis**

### **2.5.1 Transcription**

Challenges inherent to the transcription process include correctly interpreting speech that may be fragmented and responses that may change direction mid-sentence – all without the visual cues normally used to express and interpret meaning. Those challenges were perhaps particularly acute in this research, since respondents discussed highly complex and emotionally charged topics in English rather than their native language. These factors added a significant risk of human error and research bias, as “the judgments involved in placing something as simple as a period or a semicolon are complex and shape the meaning of the written word and, hence, of the interview itself” (Marshall and Rossman, 2006). Although I was unable to fully eliminate these issues, I did make a significant effort to minimize them. Immediately after – and occasionally during - each interview, I took notes regarding facial expressions, hand gestures, moments of significant emotion or unusual reactions. Throughout the transcription process, I listened several times to the audiotape in order to make sure I documented responses accurately. I took note of things like pauses, tone and volume – as these can be indicators of emotional intensity and perception.

### **2.5.2 Analysis**

In the analysis phase, I attempted to derive the meaning of responses by reading, rereading and reflecting upon statements made in the context of the original interview (Smith, 2004; Creswell, 1997). Specifically, I paid attention to the ways in which respondents constructed narratives regarding the ITQ system and its perceived impacts, as well as other forms of ‘rights’ they identified and discussed. In the following chapters, general themes and elements of commonality that arose from the data are presented and described.

### **2.5.3 Limitations**

The language gap between respondents and myself represented perhaps the most significant limitation to this research design. Clearly, ethnographic research conducted in a foreign language is not ideal, as you may lose valuable information, as well as subtleties and nuance of language in translation. My inability to speak Icelandic also limited my respondent pool to those who spoke a fair amount of English, although this is not a *particularly* significant

obstacle in a nation like Iceland, where most people speak English at an advanced level. Although I was able to read a great deal of written material in English, I was unable to access the vast majority of what has been written in Icelandic, which is an unfortunate and surely significant disadvantage. Here, however, I relied upon the help of friends who assisted in the translation of certain important documents. And as the goal of this research is to provide an in-depth analysis of a small pool of respondents rather than a broad survey of a larger population, this limitation is perhaps not seriously disadvantageous.

# 3 Overview of rights-based fisheries management

Iceland's ITQ system is but one example of a rights-based fisheries management regime. Although both the structure and application of specific rights-based systems vary widely (Mansfield, 2004b), the theories that underlie them reflect a larger and more general discourse regarding the meaning, use, and impact of privatization in ocean fisheries. This chapter summarizes the development and theoretical foundation of rights-based fisheries management in the hope of establishing a contextual framework for respondents' discussions of the Icelandic case.

## 3.1 Historical development

### 3.1.1 Fisheries: A 'commons'?

Although the ocean itself – at least in Euro-American tradition – has long been considered a realm of open access and commercial freedom (e.g. Pardo, 1967), it has also been an arena for ongoing struggles over access and control. The concept of rights-based fisheries management is not particularly new. Anthropologists recognize the fact that fisheries around the world have long been subject to various forms of *de facto* rights regimes held by fishing communities, individuals or groups (Acheson, 1975; Berkes, 1989). In Acheson's 'Anthropology of Fishing' (1981), he reviews a body of literature demonstrating that throughout history, fishers have often claimed various kinds of rights to fishery resources, whether recognized by law or enforced through local norms. Even with such rules, however, argues Acheson (1981), most fisheries were traditionally managed as 'common property' – a concept that suggests open access for a body of sanctioned users, and the exclusion of all others (Ciriacy-Wantrup and Bishop, 1975). In the second half of the twentieth century, however, as fisheries management became increasingly intertwined with neoclassical economic theory, a growing number of scholars and economists came to see common property management as dangerous and fundamentally flawed (e.g. Hardin, 1968; Scott, 1955; Christy, 1996), suggesting that a lack of clearly defined property rights represented the primary obstacle to successful management.

### 3.1.2 The 'commons' as tragedy

In 1954, H. Scott Gordon made one of the first attempts to apply systematic economic analysis to marine fisheries, arguing that the focus of management should be on reforming the property rights regime to take advantage of individual decision-making processes. Human nature made it impossible to sustainably govern natural resources without some form of property structure, he argued: “Wealth that is free for all is valued by no one because he who is foolhardy enough to wait for its proper time of use will find that it has been taken by another... The fish in the sea are valueless to the fishermen, because there is no assurance that they will be there for him tomorrow if they are left behind today,” (Gordon, 1954: 124; cited in Gissurason, 2000). Later works by Scott (1955) and Hardin (1968) reformed and popularized these ideas, with Hardin’s *Tragedy of the Commons* becoming a well-known metaphorical analysis of the perceived dangers of common property and “one of the most enduring explanations of environmental degradation” in modern history (Mansfield, 2004b: 567).

In his well-known treatise, Hardin presents two examples of problems demonstrating the theory that individuals with unlimited access to exhaustible resources cannot help but overexploit them: overgrazing in a common pasture and overpopulation of a common Earth (Hardin, 1968). Without private property rights, he argues, environmental tragedy is inevitable because human beings are by nature self-serving individuals who seek to maximize profit; each one will continue to increase his own harvest at the expense of the common good, illustrating what Macinko (1993) describes as “the collective irrationality of individually rational action,” (pp. 921-22). According to Lam and Pauly (2010), Hardin’s suggested solution of implementing either private property rights or state ownership contributed to a swell of enthusiasm and advocacy for the privatization of natural resources, inspiring researchers and practitioners to argue that limiting freedom of access and operation in the fishery commons represented the key to sustainable resource management.

In the decades that followed, fisheries economists linked Hardin’s ‘tragedy of the commons’ to another, more economic, tragedy: overcapitalization and inefficiency. Open access to a fishery resource “is widely accepted as the cause of over-investment in the harvest,” argued Christy (1996: 287). A system granting open access would create a state of excessive competition amongst fishermen forced to continually reinvest in their fishing power and technology – unnecessarily consuming capital and labor that could otherwise be funnelled into

other sectors of the economy. Efforts to find ways to reduce this “sickening excess of investment in individual fishing capital,” (Scott, 1989: 24), led to additional support for private property rights, which various scholars and economists saw as the only viable solution (Charles, 1992; Rettig and Ginter, 1978). Fishing “is an economic activity which should be, and will be, governed by property rights regimes,” wrote Christy (1996: 288); the proper role of government, he argued, should be to get out of fisheries management altogether and allow market mechanisms to harness the individualistic behavior of fishermen for the common good.

## **3.2 Theory and rationale**

### **3.2.1 Rights-based management and neoliberal economic theory**

Since the 1980s, emphasis on the virtues of using market mechanisms to solve environmental problems has grown – reflecting the expanding influence of neoliberal economic theory. Neoliberalism generally “posits markets as the ultimate tool for achieving optimal use and allocation of scarce resources,” (Mansfield, 2004b: 565), promoting policies such as deregulation, liberalization of trade and investment, marketization and privatization (Agnew and Corbridge, 1995; Peck, 2001). Many scholars have remarked upon the zeal with which Western economies and policy makers embraced this type of approach. According to Dilley (1992), enthusiasm for privatization appeared to be “a global phenomenon in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century.” For several decades, agrees Bromley (2009), “the prevailing Zeitgeist” emphasized privatization and deregulation, celebrating “the wisdom and prudence of the widest possible scope for individual autonomy in matters of creating income and accumulating wealth,” (pp. 280). Neoliberal ideology has been presented “as an inevitable and natural state”, write Heynen and Robbins (2005: 6) – a condition inherent to modernity (see Brenner and Theodore, 2002). The application of neoliberal thinking to fisheries management gave rise to new regulatory tools that viewed human interaction with ecological processes through a prism of economic theory, transforming fisheries “through the implementation of standard capitalist institutions such as private property, wage relations, and corporate structures,” (St. Martin, 2001: 124) – justifying significant structural changes and promising increased profitability as a result.

Individual Transferable Quota (ITQ) systems – like the one applied in Iceland - represent one of the clearest examples of this kind of approach, and rest on the assumption that market forces harness an individual’s inherent profit motive to make more innovative, efficient decisions. The theory rests in large part on the concept of ‘rationality’, derived from the neoclassical concept that equates ‘rational behavior’ with that which maximizes individual profit. ‘Rationality’ (denoting, at least in this context, the drive for profit maximization) is assumed to be a natural characteristic of the human race; property rights harness this rationality for the greater good, thereby averting Hardin’s vision of inevitable economic and environmental collapse. As Mansfield (2004) explains, “privatization and marketization are not the same thing, yet in neoliberal approaches, they are tied together through the presumption that private property rights are necessary for markets to work, and that markets are necessary for optimal economic and environmental behavior,” (pp. 314). ITQ systems marketize fisheries by distributing a certain share of the total allowable catch (TAC) to individuals or companies and allowing those shares to be used or traded on a market (McCay, 2004). According to Mansfield (2004b), given the difficulty of monitoring, divvying up, or allocating stocks located underwater, transferable quota systems represent one way to “adapt privatization to the realities” of this particular resource (pp. 579).

### **3.2.2 Theoretical economic benefits**

The theoretical economic benefits of ITQ systems have been widely discussed. A number of scholars (e.g. Arnason, 1993; Eythórsson, 1996b; Christy, 1996) promote the ability of such systems to reduce costs and improve – or make more efficient – the behavior of individual fishers and firms. Because private access to a certain volume of catch is assured, a fisher or fishing company can concentrate on operating at minimal cost rather than on outcompeting other vessels, thus reducing wasted investment and effort throughout the industry. A bound volume of catch, argues Arnason (1993) – a longtime supporter of ITQs in the Icelandic fishery – additionally leads to improved quality since firms can only increase their profits by ensuring a higher quality product. Advocates also argue that transferable quotas grant fishers the freedom to make better (more efficient) decisions by allowing them to make the best use of both time and capital (Scott, 1986). A quota holder can, for example, time fishing effort in accordance with market fluctuations, and can acquire additional rights or sell when most profitable.

Industry consolidation, encouraged by ITQ systems, can theoretically lead to further gains in efficiency and profit. Relatively unrestricted trading of transferable quota shares, argue advocates, encourages less efficient fishers to either improve their business practices or sell their quota and exit the fishery. As the most efficient firms and vessels purchase additional quota from those who cannot compete, they gradually eliminate excess capacity and investment (Eythórsson, 1996b). By creating profit that can then be invested in other sectors, this should theoretically benefit not only successful fishers but also the economy as a whole (Eythórsson 1996b; Arnason, 2008). In the case of Iceland, wealth and financial assets tied to fishing rights fueled tremendous growth in the nation’s financial sector, powering Iceland’s economic boom at the turn of the 21st century (Einarsson, 2011). Chapter 4 discusses this in greater detail.

### **3.2.3 Theoretical benefits for the conservation of fish stocks**

Beyond the economic benefits of ITQ systems, some argue that fixed rights and market transferability also create a conservation incentive for industry participants by changing their prerogatives as ‘owners’ of a resource (Christy, 1973; Rettig and Ginter 1978; Copes 1979). By guaranteeing fishers a certain share of the annual catch, ITQs create a link between a quota-holder’s behavior today and what will be available to him/her in the future. In theory, since the market value of quota shares should reflect expectations of future resource rent, declining stocks would lower quota prices – thereby encouraging fishers to act in their long-term interest by conserving the resource (Eythórsson, 1996b; GAO, 2004; Hersoug et al., 2007). In 2008, Costello et al. suggested that well-designed ITQ systems may indeed help prevent stock collapse across a range of taxa and ecosystems.

## **3.3 Perceived inevitability**

A transition to property rights regimes in fisheries throughout the world came to be seen by many as nearly inevitable – a natural and unavoidable element of modernization and forward progress (e.g. Arnason, 1993; Christy, 1996). According to Ostrom and Hess (2000), many economists tend to associate common property regimes with a bygone past, “and to explain the growth of modern, Western societies in part as a result of changing from common property to private property,” (pp. 334). This suggests an association – at least in some circles – between rights-based fisheries management regimes and notions of progress and

advancement. In some cases, this has contributed to a sidelining of social concerns. Although recognizing that the effects of implementing an ITQ system could be ‘painful’ for some participants, Christy (1996) argued that the transition to property rights regimes was “inexorable... The danger is that attempts to alleviate the pain may, unless carefully taken, result in long-term imperfections in the ultimate outcome,” (pp. 288). In his view, therefore, although social costs are regrettable, the endgame is non-negotiable; issues of fairness, legitimacy and social justice are viewed as minor problems or externalities to be overcome along the way.

In the context of such assumptions, argues Olson (2005), the reluctance of many fishers to embrace privatization came to be seen as a reflection of inherent conservatism and irrationality. Anthropology – along with concerns about human communities – became “marginalized in policy by a geographic imagination that constructs communities outside modernity, where a notion of economics versus culture easily slips into rational versus irrational,” (Olson, 2005: 259). Arnason (1993), for example, acknowledged existing opposition to privatization, but dismissed it as largely irrelevant because it did not reflect neoliberal economic theory: “In most countries, and Iceland is no exception,” he wrote, “there is strong social opposition to radical changes in the institutional framework of production and employment. A great deal of this opposition seems to derive from traditional values and vested interests rather than rational arguments,” (pp. 206).

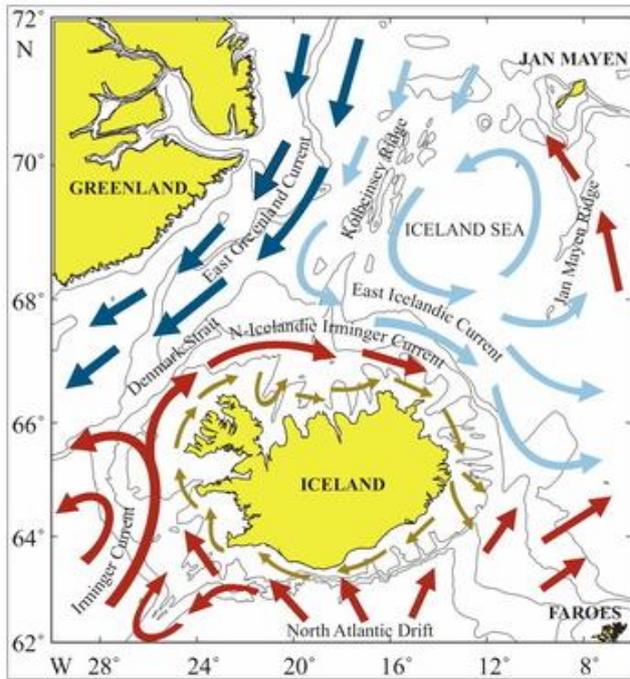
## **4 Icelandic fisheries & fishing communities**

### **4.1 Introduction to Icelandic fisheries**

Fish have long been an integral and inextricable part of Iceland's history and culture (Pálsson, 1990). The island's remote geographic location in the North Atlantic, along with a climate and topography rendering most of the country's interior inhospitable to human settlement, have contributed to the importance of marine resources and the various cultural practices that surround them. Although Iceland's population of approximately 318,575 (Statistics Iceland, 2012) is relatively small, the country ranks among the world's largest fishing nations (Valtysson, n.d.). Since the island's initial settlement in the 9<sup>th</sup> century, fisheries have helped shape cultural heritage, economic development and the growth of communities – a pattern of influence that continues into the present day (Skaptadóttir, 2007; Pálsson and Durrenberger, 1996). This chapter reviews the history and development of Icelandic fisheries and 'fishing villages' – particularly those in the Westfjords – in order to embed the contemporary controversy over the ITQ system in an appropriate historical context.

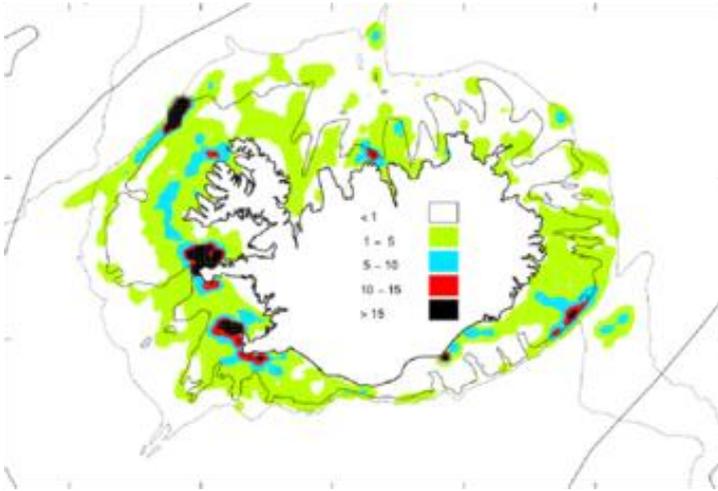
#### **4.1.1 Ecology**

Iceland's fishing grounds rank among the world's most productive, due in large part to the convergence of warm Atlantic waters from the south and colder, nutrient-rich waters from the polar region (Figure 4). This mix of currents creates a biologically rich environment supporting approximately twenty-five commercially important species including cod, redfish, haddock, saithe, halibut, capelin, scallops and shrimp (Icelandic Ministry of Fisheries and Agriculture, Ecosystem). The cod fishery, however, has historically been Iceland's most important, consistently accounting for more than half of all export earnings accrued from domestic marine products (Icelandic Ministry of Fisheries and Agriculture, Main species). In fact, argue Jónsson and Pálsson (2006), cod – a demersal species typically found near the sea bottom – has been at the center of both the history of Icelandic fisheries and the development of the country's fish processing industry.



**Figure 4** Major ocean currents around Iceland. Source: Icelandic Ministry of Fisheries and Agriculture, ([www.fisheries.is/ecosystem](http://www.fisheries.is/ecosystem))

The major spawning grounds for most Icelandic stocks are located in the waters south and west of the island, as these areas are kept relatively warm year-round by an offshoot of the Gulf Stream called the Irminger current. Recently, however, rising ocean temperatures have changed the density and distribution of certain stocks, contributing to an increase of monkfish and mackerel in the west (Björnsson et al., 2011). Water temperature north of the country tends to be colder and to fluctuate depending on the strength of various currents; even so, northern areas remain important rearing grounds for juvenile capelin, herring, haddock and cod (Icelandic Ministry of Fisheries and Agriculture, Ecosystem). Although the main demersal fishing grounds vary geographically according to species' preferences for environmental factors such as temperature, depth, and bottom composition, the areas off the northwest and southwest coasts of Iceland tend to be especially productive and represent major feeding areas and fishing grounds for cod (Figure 5) (Sævaldsson and Valtýsson, n.d.).



**Figure 5** Fishing grounds for cod in 2008 (catch in tons per square nautical mile), all gear combined; dark areas indicate largest catches. Source: Icelandic Ministry of Fisheries and Agriculture, ([www.fisheries.is/main-species/cod/biology-and-distribution](http://www.fisheries.is/main-species/cod/biology-and-distribution))

#### 4.1.2 Economic importance

Throughout Iceland's history, fisheries have played a significant role in the nation's economic development. Traditionally, fish have been used metaphorically in the Icelandic language to express value, and several references to fish in the Icelandic sagas illustrate the resource's longstanding economic importance (Pálsson, 1990). In 2011, marine products accounted for approximately 40% of Iceland's total export value (Iceland Responsible Fisheries, n.d.). In the late 1900s, fisheries became the foundation for Iceland's 'economic renaissance', catapulting the country from relative poverty to a place among the world's wealthiest nations over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. A comparison of the country's overall Gross Domestic Product (GDP) with the growth of its fishing industry reveals a relatively stable correlation – with fluctuations in the export value of marine products reflected in GDP growth; this pattern held until the mid-1990s, when the increasing importance of the service and financial sectors broke up the direct correlation between fisheries and GDP (Heiðarsson and Sævaldsson, n.d.).

The economic importance of fishing can also be illustrated in 20<sup>th</sup> century employment statistics. Between 1930 and 1980, the number of people engaged in either fishing or fish processing grew steadily (with the exception of a temporary decline after the collapse of herring stocks in 1960) – reaching a peak in the 1980s of approximately sixteen thousand employees (Heiðarsson and Sævaldsson, n.d.). Employment figures did not begin to fall off until the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> - largely as a result of rapid growth in

sectors such as financial intermediation and aluminum manufacture, as well as the rise of factory trawlers that could process catch at sea, thereby reducing the demand for a land-based workforce and leading to the closure of many freezing plants (Þór, n.d.). Regional disparities in the number of people employed by the fishing sector throughout different parts of Iceland indicate varying degrees of regional economic dependence. Although the Northeast and the capital region of Reykjavík contain the highest numbers of individuals currently working in fisheries, proportionally the Westfjords is the region most dependent on the fishing sector – with nearly forty percent of its population employed by the industry in 2005 (Icelandic Ministry of Fisheries and Agriculture, Employment).

## **4.2 Fisheries management & fishing communities in the Westfjords**

### **4.2.1 Early limitations: Settlement – 18th century**

From the island's initial settlement in the late 9<sup>th</sup> century, fishing – along with animal husbandry – represented one of the two main pillars of Iceland's economy. The growth and development of fisheries as an independent economic sector remained constrained throughout the country's early history, however, by a combination of feudal social structures and colonial policies. Early feudal laws required landless individuals to enter into annual service contracts with landowners. Fishing was limited mainly to the spring and summer when fish were close to shore and contracted laborers could be spared from farms long enough to fish for their landlords (Þór, n.d.). This put control of access to the sea and to fishing grounds squarely in the hands of land-owning patrons (Pálsson, 1990) who did little to develop the fishing sector beyond a seasonal subsistence activity conducted from small, open rowboats (Wade, 2009). Although foreign demand for salted fish began to build in the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries, Denmark restricted the development of fisheries in its Icelandic colony by limiting trade to exchange with designated Danish merchants (Þór, n.d.).

### **4.2.2 New opportunities & coastal settlement: 19th century**

In 1788, when the colonial monopoly was finally abolished, new opportunities opened for foreign trade (Þór, n.d.). Commercial restrictions on independent fishing and shoreline access - long upheld by landowners - began to break down in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Hamilton et al., 2004: 328; Durrenberger and Pálsson, 1989). With an increase in foreign demand for salted cod, fishing became a promising form of alternative employment for tenants and laborers, who

moved out of farming regions in droves to areas along the coastline (Skaptadóttir, 2007). This exodus, argues Wade (2009), embedded fishing in the nascent independence movement, representing a way to assert not only economic independence from the Danish crown, but also the independence of individuals from former landlords.

As laborers moved to the coast, villages began to develop in areas near productive fishing grounds (Matthiasson, 1997). Although there had been small, temporary fishing stations located in many of these areas, the advent of larger sailing vessels requiring harbors and larger crews, along with the need for larger land-based workforces to salt cod, led to enough new opportunities for employment to support more permanent communities. Typically, these villages arose in fjords with little lowland – offering mainly the advantage of proximity to fishing grounds; most developed as single enterprise villages – relatively isolated from each other - in which one company under a local owner possessed a processing plant and several fishing vessels (Skaptadóttir, 2007). Some of the coastal towns that began to take shape in the 19<sup>th</sup> century – most notably Ísafjörður and Reykjavík - developed rapidly. Ísafjörður, which had only 76 inhabitants in 1850, had grown to 1,085 by 1901 (Þór, n.d.).

#### **4.2.3 Expansion & modernization: 20th century**

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with the introduction of motorized vessels – including trawlers, Icelandic fisheries underwent a period of rapid expansion and change. With both fishing effort and capacity greatly enhanced, and with motorized vessels capable of traveling longer distances, Icelanders could access practically all fish stocks off their coasts for the first time. The fleet – along with the size of the catch it brought ashore – grew rapidly; in 1905, the total catch in Icelandic demersal fisheries was 62,500 tons – by 1930 it had more than tripled to 216,700 tons (Þór, n.d.).

In the 1940s, Iceland's first independent government recognized fisheries as key to Icelandic economic development and ramped up investment to further increase catching and processing capacity (Durrenberger and Pálsson, 1989; Arnason, 1995). Following World War II, Iceland launched an ambitious program to modernize the industry and integrate widely dispersed fishing communities into the national economy (Skaptadóttir, 2000). In order to further these goals, the government provided loans to purchase newer, bigger trawlers – and also worked to improve quality of life in coastal villages through investments in health care, education and infrastructure (Skaptadóttir, 2000; Baerenholdt, 1994). By the 1960s and '70s, writes

Skaptadóttir (2007), the growing prosperity of coastal villages could be seen in the construction of new homes and the provision of improved services. Given their history, she argues, despite being geographically isolated, the small coastal communities of Iceland have historically not been isolated either culturally or economically, but have instead been embedded in the national and international economy since their settlement.

#### **4.2.4 Assertion of sovereign control**

As the Icelandic fisheries became a larger, more industrial operation and catch levels continued to increase, it became clear that Icelandic fishing grounds - although productive - were not inexhaustible. In the late 1960s, Iceland's herring stock collapsed due to the combined stressors of high fishing mortality and unfavorable environmental conditions, prompting the Icelandic government to issue a moratorium on herring fishing in 1971 (Jakobsson and Stefánsson, 1999). Fishing grounds remained open to international fleets, however, which took approximately one third of the area's total cod catch in 1975 (Icelandic Ministry of Fisheries and Agriculture). Arnason (1993), arguing later in support of ITQs, said that Iceland's fisheries were, at the time, "for all intents and purposes, international," (pp. 203), which made any real domestic management largely impracticable.

Citing both an urgent need to protect resources – especially the valuable Atlantic cod stock – and the economic viability of Iceland as an independent state, Icelanders sought to gain sovereign control of fishery resources through a gradual extension of the country's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) - first to four nautical miles, then twelve, then fifty and finally 200. All coastal states, argued the Icelandic government, especially those as heavily dependent on fisheries as Iceland was, needed to be able to manage the resource within local waters (Icelandic Ministry of Fisheries and Agriculture, Management). Iceland's claim to expanded national control initially met with opposition from other fishing nations – most notably Britain, which sent its navy to protect British fishing vessels in Icelandic waters. Once Britain withdrew from the last of four so-called 'Cod Wars' in 1976, argues Gissurarson (2000), Iceland had effectively appropriated resources within the 200-mile zone as national property. Other coastal states soon followed suit, eager to lay claim to their own marine resources; the extension of coastal state jurisdiction to 200 nautical miles was codified by the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and entered into force in 1994. Today, Iceland's EEZ extends over approximately 760,000 square kilometers – an area seven times larger than that of the island itself (Icelandic Ministry of Fisheries and Agriculture).

## **4.3 A new approach to fisheries management**

### **4.3.1 Effort restrictions: 1977-83**

Despite the assertion of national control over Icelandic fishing grounds, concerns regarding overfishing continued. In 1975, the Icelandic Marine Research Institute (MRI) published what eventually became known as the 'Black Report' – warning that cod stocks were in danger of being overfished. Current catch levels could not be sustained, the Institute argued, recommending a total allowable catch of 230,000 metric tons (MT). When actual catch levels significantly exceeded this figure, the government introduced effort quotas in the demersal fisheries, effectively limiting the number of fishing days permitted to each vessel (Icelandic Ministry of Fisheries and Agriculture, Management). According to Gissurason (2000), this system received strong support from the Westfjords, where inhabitants believed that their geographical proximity to fertile cod grounds would grant them a competitive advantage. Effort quotas largely failed to restrict fishing effort, however, since entry into the fleet remained relatively open and the government placed no restrictions on the amount of fish each vessel could bring ashore. Instead, argues Gissurason, the system prompted a competitive race to catch as many fish as possible within the allotted number of days, thereby driving up costs and resulting in catches consistently higher than limits recommended by the MRI.

### **4.3.2 Vessel catch quotas: 1983-90**

By 1983, managers concluded that the effort limitations in place since 1976 had not been successful, and that the rising costs and high catch levels they encouraged highlighted the need for a new approach. In 1984, Iceland applied vessel catch quotas – or limits on the amount of fish that could be caught by individual vessels – to its demersal fisheries. Under this system, the Minister of Fisheries set a Total Allowable Catch (TAC) for each commercial species based on the scientific recommendations of the Marine Research Institute. Proportional shares of this TAC were then allotted to individual vessels on the basis of their best two years of fishing during the three years leading up to the system's introduction (Icelandic Ministry of Fisheries and Agriculture, Management).

Originally intended to protect boat owners who for some reason had been idle or operating abnormally during the three baseline years, an effort-based option initially made it possible for fishers to continue operating under effort restrictions rather than vessel quotas. This

became an attractive alternative for those who felt dissatisfied with their allocated share (Eythórsson, 2000) as well as for those who recognized an opportunity to re-enter the catch quota system with a new fishing history that would qualify them for a larger share in the TAC (Icelandic Ministry of Fisheries and Agriculture, Management). Transferable and perfectly divisible shares made it possible to transfer any fraction of a given quota to another Icelandic vessel, subject to some restriction.

### **4.3.3 Comprehensive ITQ system: 1990 – 2012**

Although originally established as a temporary measure to prevent the collapse of valuable stocks, the 1990 Fisheries Management Act (FMA) extended the ITQ system to most commercial stocks and abolished the option of effort quotas for trawlers and other large vessels (Icelandic Ministry of Fisheries and Agriculture, Management). In addition, the legislation further liberalized quota exchange, making it possible to transfer shares of the TAC as separate commodities (Arnason, 1993). In a way, concludes Eythórsson (2000), the 1990 FMA made Iceland “a test site for a market-based fisheries management system”, providing the basis for a kind of quota ‘stock-market’ that continuously redistributed fishing rights between vessel owners throughout the country (pp. 11).

## **4.4 The ITQ system and the Icelandic financial sector**

Proponents of the ITQ system had envisioned significant benefits for the rest of the Icelandic economy, arguing that transforming fishing rights into commodities that could be traded at market would theoretically generate wealth that could be used as a foundation on which to raise financial capital and build other sectors of the country’s economy (Arnason, 2008). After legislation passed enabling ITQ shares to be used as a form of financial collateral – further enhancing their market value – the level of indebtedness in the Icelandic fishing industry more than doubled between 1997 and 2007; this, however, argued Arnason (2008), was actually a sign of the system’s success in generating economic growth in other industries – particularly the financial sector. The ITQ system was, in fact, write Benediktsson and Karlsdóttir (2011), “like a shot in the arm for Icelandic capitalism” (pp. 231), in a sense ‘creating’ sudden wealth (Arnason, 2008) and making Iceland appear – at least to some - as a vindication of free market principles (Wade, 2009). In 2007, Hannes Hólmsteinn Gissurarson was quoted in *Ísland í dag*: “We activated capital that was dead before... The fish stocks did not have a price tag, they

were non-transferable and could not be used as collateral... Here in Iceland, capital was handed over to private owners, and then it became alive,” (cited in Benediktsson and Karlsdóttir, 2011: 231).

The transition to ITQ management occurred during a period of increasing deregulation and general enthusiasm for neoliberal policies – not only in fisheries management - but in other areas of the Icelandic economy, as well. In 2003, Iceland’s three largest banks were privatized (Einarsson, 2011). Financial capital generated by the trade in quota shares, combined with a lack of control mechanisms on financial transactions, permitted the banks to invest heavily abroad; between 2003 and 2007, foreign debt held by these three institutions increased to 900% of Iceland’s GDP (Jónsson, 2009). By 2006, with the subprime crisis building in the United States, various economists began suggesting that Iceland’s rapid growth was, in fact, a leading indicator of impending problems. On July 13, 2006, the IMF released a Staff Report warning that the pace of growth had exposed the Icelandic financial system to imbalance and vulnerability (IMF, 2006).

By October 2008, writes Zarrilli (2011), it all proved too much for the Icelandic economy. By the 10<sup>th</sup> of October, all three private banks had collapsed and been taken over by the state. Fishing companies, many of them embedded within corporate networks that included Iceland’s major banks, found themselves heavily indebted; in July 2009, the total debt of the Icelandic fishing industry totaled ISK 550 billion – more than one third of the country’s GDP in 2008 (Hávardsson, 2009). The Icelandic public soon erupted in indignation; crowds demanded the government’s resignation and new elections, ultimately bringing to power a coalition of the Social Democratic Alliance and the Green Party after 18 years of uninterrupted rule by the center-right.

## **4.5 Controversy over the Icelandic ITQ system**

The Icelandic ITQ system has long been a topic of great contention – perhaps, argues Eythórsson (2000), the most divisive and conflict-laden issue in modern Icelandic politics. This should not come as a surprise, writes Gissurarson (2000), considering that in Iceland, “almost everyone lives in some ways close to the fisheries, and everything which happens there is well reported in the media, whereas in most other countries fishing is marginal to the economy and usually given scant attention in public debate,” (pp. 59). This section, which

surveys a range of themes for which the ITQ system is criticized, highlights both the diversity and depth of social critique.

#### **4.5.1 Consolidation, geographic redistribution & rural development**

One of the major criticisms of Iceland's ITQ system has been its concentration of quota shares into the hands of a few large individuals and companies – often at the perceived expense of small coastal communities and their inhabitants. As intended, the transferability of ITQ shares led to a flurry of mergers and acquisitions as quota holders exchanged fishing rights (Benediktsson and Karlsdóttir, 2011). Within the first few years after the system's implementation, Pálsson and Helgason (1996) noted a significant decrease in the number of quota shares held by small companies. According to Jónsdóttir and Knútsson (2009), a total of four hundred and twenty-eight fishing companies dissolved between 2003 and 2007; by that time, ten of the largest quota holders controlled approximately 51.7 percent of all ITQs in the country. Consolidation has been associated with a great deal of change in small coastal villages – particularly those in the Westfjords. As the market value of quota shares increased, local quota holders could often sell their rights for much more money than they could get by landing their catch; many accordingly chose to sell their shares, invest the money elsewhere or move away – leaving those remaining in the villages with reduced access to fishing, fewer jobs and a drop in the value of their homes (Skaptadóttir, 2000, 2007; Eythórsson, 1996).

The geographic redistribution of quotas away from certain coastal communities, argues Skaptadóttir (2000) affected “all other aspects of life in a fishing village” (pp. 314) and led to a host of social problems including insecurity, loss of employment, depopulation, outmigration, a significant decrease in the value of homes, and social alienation (Skaptadóttir, 2000, 2007). She also links the implementation of the ITQ system to diminishing governmental support for regional development, as the Icelandic state began to emphasize increasing the productivity and efficiency of fish processing firms rather than maintaining employment and services. Other factors contributing to demographic change in coastal villages included the increased ability of factory trawlers to process their catch at sea, leading to the closure of many land-based plants (Karlsdóttir, 2008). As of 2008, at least 60% of land-based jobs in fish processing had vanished (Sigurmundsson, 2008). In addition, the growth of the financial sector ensured that the importance of coastal villages like those in the Westfjords declined in relation to the national economy as a whole, since “the brave new financial world

was almost entirely centered on Reykjavík and neighboring areas,” (Benediktsson and Karlsdóttir, 2011: 231).

#### **4.5.2 Social equity & ‘fairness’**

According to other critics of the ITQ system, it has also had significant adverse impacts on social equity (Copes 1997a, 1994; Pálsson and Helgason 1996; Pálsson and Pétursdóttir 1997). Although some of this has to do with consolidation, other critiques address a broader opposition to the nature of fishing rights as defined and allocated by the system. Critics who see the ITQ system as an effective privatization of a common-pool resource object to the closure of access to fishers and communities who have long depended on it – a version of ‘creeping enclosure’ (McCay, 2008) that has “led to considerable bitterness in many parts of the country,” (Benediktsson and Karlsdóttir, 2011: 231). One of the most controversial aspects of the Icelandic system, argue Copes and Pálsson (2000) was the initial allocation process – perceived by some elements of the public as a “gifting of access rights to public resources, privileging an emerging class of ‘armchair fishermen’” who make enormous profits not by fishing, but by leasing their quota to other individuals without their own shares (pp. 2). This gave rise to an elaborate vocabulary of feudal metaphors documented by Pálsson and Helgason (1996), applying phrases such as ‘quota-kings’ or ‘sealords’ to those who had been allocated quota and chose to lease that quota to others at considerable profit. This vocabulary, as well as the social tension it reflects, is particularly noteworthy, argues Einarsson (2011), “as up until recently the common national ideology has promoted a cultural identity of Icelandic society as an egalitarian and classless society, with great social mobility and little economic difference between groups and between individuals” (pp. 117).

#### **4.5.3 Legal challenges**

Finally, the legal foundations of the Icelandic ITQ system have been challenged in court. In September 2001, fishermen from the Westfjords village of Patreksfjörður publically defied the 1990 Fisheries Management Act (FMA), which they perceived to be an unjust and immoral denial of their right to harvest common property resources, and acting on what Einarsson (2011) describes as “the culturally and historically ingrained assumption among Icelanders that the fisheries could not belong to anyone as individual property and that their actions thus were ethically justifiable and in defense of equal rights to access the commons,” (pp. 112). After taking their case to the United Nations, the UN Human Rights Committee (UNHRC)

found that the FMA violated Article 26 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Citing differential treatment between those individuals who received quota in 1984 and those who began fishing later, the Court found the two men to be victims of discrimination and declared Iceland's obligation to compensate the two men and revise the FMA in accordance with international human rights law (Einarsson, 2011). ITQ systems in other countries have been challenged on similar grounds of social equity and human rights; Copes and Pálsson (2000) document legal challenges to ITQs in Iceland, Canada and Latin America. Indigenous groups have used international human rights treaties in the past to ensure improved access to fisheries resources, as well as greater equity between small-scale fishers and larger industrial fleets (Davis and Jentoft, 2001; Smith and Dodson, 2010; Allison et al., 2010).

## **5 The perceived significance of fisheries & fishing communities**

According to Helgason (2011), an old Icelandic saying declares that “life is saltfish.” Although the ITQ system is a regulatory structure designed to manage the actions of individual fishers and fishing corporations, respondents frequently embedded their discussions of the system and its fairness within broader narratives centered on the cultural and social significance of fisheries and fishing communities. In order to more fully understand how respondents perceive the impacts of the ITQ system – as well as their rights, this significance must be explored. Creed (2004) notes the need to “examine community as a culturally contingent notion and document what it means to particular people in local and historical contexts,” (pp. 57; see also Pálsson, 1991; Apostle et al., 1998). Elements such as “production of space and place,” argue Clay and Olson (2008), “the practices of fishing, notions of identity, and other cultural, political-economic, and geographic processes all inhere in shaping a ‘fishing community’ and in affecting understandings and experiences of vulnerability,” (pp.149; see also McCay, 2000; St. Martin, 2001; Olson, 2005). In this case, when talking about fisheries and fishing villages in the Westfjords, nearly all respondents brought up notions of heritage, belonging, place-based attachment and identity. The following chapter examines respondents’ references to these themes in order to explore the social context in which responses to the ITQ system (i.e. support, opposition and resistance) take shape.

### **5.1 Fisheries as an economic foundation**

Among nearly all respondents, the first and most frequently mentioned element of fisheries’ significance was economic importance. This is not surprising given the long history of fisheries in the Westfjords, the role they played in Iceland’s 20<sup>th</sup> century economic development, and the degree to which the Westfjords remain economically dependent on fisheries in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Heiðarsson and Sævaldsson, n.d.). As the economic significance of fisheries in the Westfjords has been well documented elsewhere (see Chapter 3), this chapter focuses on the degree to which respondents emphasized the role that fisheries play in enabling and assuring the economic development of the entire region, serving as the foundation for all other commercial activity and the continued viability of entire communities.

Every respondent identified the number of jobs associated with fishing as the primary illustration of its economic significance. Recognizing that even individuals not directly employed as captains, crewmembers, owners, or processors depend on the fishery to a certain extent, several respondents stressed the breadth of the fisheries' economic importance. "It is said that any boat that goes to sea creates at least three jobs ashore, you know – both in processing and also in various service industries," noted Respondent C. "Maybe it's more – maybe it's five or six." As Respondent D explained, "Here, every firm is linked to the fishing industry in some way. It doesn't matter what you pick out...they all thrive on the fishing. Electricians thrive on the smaller boats. Even those who do the bookkeeping, they thrive on the firms that are in the fishing industry... it's like everyone is connected there." His use of the word 'thrive' suggests fisheries as the lifeblood of the region – the energy that keeps everything else up and running.

According to most respondents, because fisheries represent the region's economic foundation, loss of access to fishing rights can lead to economic collapse or stagnation. In a region like the Westfjords – geographically isolated and possessing few other natural resources, noted respondents, transfer of quota shares to vessels in other villages or parts of Iceland can lead to huge reductions in local employment opportunities. Most respondents mentioned this as one of the ITQ system's most distressing effects. Respondent G, for example, remarked:

"If you look back thirty or forty years – not longer than that, you see all these small fishing towns in Iceland – like Flateyri, like Bolungarvík – just here in the Westfjords, they could all survive. They were having a good life because people had a job in the fish factory – the fishermen and all that. What's happening now is that there are no jobs left for the people."

Here, he links the availability of jobs on boats and in fish processing plants with 'a good life' for the inhabitants of small fishing towns; in this case, the 'good life' includes the ability of communities to simply survive – indicating his uncertainty about the future. This sense that fisheries represent the hub of all economic activity serves as an important backdrop to discussions of the ITQ system in the Westfjords, emphasizing not only the general economic importance of the industry to the region, but also the degree to which all inhabitants - not only those directly engaged in fishing - consider themselves to be directly impacted by fisheries policy and regulation.

## **5.2 Fisheries and cultural ‘rootedness’: heritage and place-based attachment**

In addition to their economic importance, fisheries also play a significant role in respondents’ understandings of the region’s history and their own heritage. The history of the Icelandic fisheries is not simply a story of economic development and change; in the context of a small seafaring nation like Iceland, “the annals of the fisheries constitute above all cultural history covering an important aspect of the nation’s culture and heritage,” (Þór, History, n.d.). Examining the role of fisheries within a “heritage narrative” (Jacob et al., 2005) or “cultural biography” (Griffith, 1999) helps to place fisheries policy, as well as perceptions of that policy, in a more appropriate historical and situational context. Respondents identified several major ways in which fisheries provide them with a strong attachment to place, expressed through either historical or geographical heritage. A particularly profound attachment to place has been called ‘existential insideness’ by Relph (1975) or ‘rootedness’ by Tuan (1980). Both terms refer to a feeling of identity with a place, as though one ‘belongs’ there (Cochrane, 1987: 7). In this context, the term ‘rootedness’ applies because respondents perceive fisheries providing them with a sense of belonging – both within a temporal landscape linking them to their ancestors, and a geographic landscape anchoring them in Westfjords villages and providing the frame through which these places are understood.

### **5.2.1 Fisheries & temporal rootedness**

Respondents consistently associated fishing in the Westfjords with a strong sense of tradition and heritage, emphasizing the fact that fishing has been important “since the settlement” and repeatedly referring back to the very beginnings of human habitation in Iceland in order to illustrate the industry’s longstanding significance. Repeated use of such phrases indicates that respondents perceive fishing as a link to the past - an element of unbroken cultural continuity that has underpinned life in the Westfjords, and in Iceland as a whole, for as long as humans have lived there. Six of the respondents referenced personal family histories in the fishing industry, but even those respondents without direct familial ties referred to a sense of extended familial heritage linked to fishing and shared by all Icelanders – particularly those in the Westfjords. Respondent G, who has no personal ties to the fishery, explained it this way: “I think the fishing industry touches everyone in Iceland because ... the fish and the fishermen is what our great-great-granddads worked on.” Here, he expresses a sense of common cultural

heritage that extends beyond his own immediate family and provides him with a shared sense of belonging. His use of the phrase ‘our great-great-granddads’, referring to all Icelanders, emphasizes this common history, as well as his perception of fishing as one fundamental piece of the cultural glue holding Icelanders together.

### **5.2.2 Fisheries & geographic rootedness**

The sense of cultural rootedness articulated by respondents also had significant geographical implications, illustrating the degree to which respondents perceive the history and heritage of physical *places* in the Westfjords to be tied to the fisheries. Throughout their narratives, respondents expressed significant ‘place attachment’, defined as a felt significance and association with a particular location through time and space (Relph, 1976; Tuan, 1974). Biographical experiences foster such attachment through affective meanings, identity, attitudes and behavior (Altman and Low, 1992; Greider and Garkovich, 1994). In this case, respondents expressed a form of place attachment intimately entwined with fishing grounds and the fisheries themselves. To a considerable degree, fishing serves as the framework that establishes respondents’ understandings of where they live and how they relate to their environment. This is perhaps unsurprising given that villages in the Westfjords developed on the basis of their proximity to productive fishing grounds (see Chapter 4). Nevertheless, it is worthwhile noting here the ways in which respondents understand and articulate the relationship between fisheries and place.

Several respondents emphasized a link between Westfjords municipalities and the fishing grounds located nearby, demonstrating that in this context, attachment to place includes both terrestrial and marine landscapes, with fisheries serving as the bridge linking land-based communities to the sea. Respondent D, in discussing the history of Bolungarvík, stressed its existential ties to the fishing industry:

“It has been since the year 1000 we’ve been thriving on fish – especially here in Bolungarvík. Because the farmers from Ísafjarðarjúp – they used to come here for fishing and have some of their hands with them, so they were rowing boats from Bolungarvík to fish in the wintertime... the history is very old.”

Elements of Icelandic literature and lore similarly illustrate the links between Westfjords villages and fishing grounds. Respondent D referred to certain aspects of this heritage in the

ancient Sagas, which embed the relationship between fisheries and communities in the realm of literature and legend. The pride that people in Bolungarvík have for their village, its history, and its identity as a fishing community, he explained, stems in part from its role in such stories:

“Bolungarvík is one of the oldest fishing towns in the whole of Iceland. We claim it to be the oldest [laughing] because our ancestor - Þuríður sundafyllir - who claimed Bolungarvík, she also set the fishing grounds right outside here. The saga says that she took two of everything that the farmers caught, she took for making those fishing grounds.”

Gesturing to an area of deep water depicted on a nautical chart, he explained that, “this here is called Þuríður sundafyllir, which means somebody who fills up the deep sea... She used this rock here. And her son was turned into stone and used to be right here.” Such legends embed fishing grounds in the creation story – and thus identity – of the village itself. The links between physical locations and landmarks (such as rocks and deep-water channels), community history, identity and legend are thus bound inextricably to the fishery resource.

Finally, the sense of familial heritage discussed in Section 5.2.1 also has geographic implications. An ancestral history tied to the fisheries ensures – at least for some – an identification with place and the natural environment, particularly the sea. Respondent H explained that when she thinks about villages like hers, she “see[s] it with the eyes of [her] father and forefathers” and cannot, therefore, separate the village from the ocean nearby and the fish that inhabit it. “They were all very close to the sea and to the fish and the waters,” she said. The importance of her ancestors’ association with the ocean and its resources continues to influence her understanding of the village today.

In the context of discussions regarding the implications of the ITQ system, these links between fisheries and a sense of cultural and geographic rootedness contribute to the perception that ensuring access to fishing rights is an important – and perhaps necessary – element of community survival. Sense of place, writes Larson (2004), “is more than a purely emotional or primordial connection to a home place that vanishes in the modern world. It is instead the way we understand and experience social and economic change... and the reason we continue to find meaning in our surroundings despite the fact that they are ultimately beyond our individual control” (pp. 958). The place-based heritage surrounding fisheries links

the contemporary experiences and identities of Westfjords inhabitants to those of their ancestors and binds them to the region, to their villages and to particular areas of the ocean itself. The potential significance of this lies in the degree to which it may influence inhabitants' understandings and reactions to fishery management policies that may seem to deny or warp those connections. This will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 8.

### **5.3 Fisheries & identity**

In their discussion of sociocultural elements that may impact the ways in which individuals understand and respond to events and vulnerabilities, Clay and Olson (2008) include “notions of identity”. During discussions with respondents, it became clear that for many, fisheries represent or are associated with particular elements of personal and collective identity. Indeed, argues Durrenberger (1996), fishing redefined Iceland’s national identity: “political mobilization, national self-determination, capital investment, wage labor, and the hope of a prosperous future all developed together to link fishing, the sea, prosperity, national, and individual independence into a single *gestalt* in terms of which Icelanders now understand their recent past and present” (pp. 184), replacing earlier, more bucolic images of ‘Icelandicness’ based on livestock farming. This chapter divides respondents’ discussions of identity into various themes at three major scales: national, regional and personal. The element of identity common to all three scales is a sense of independence. Sociologists such as Hartz (1964) and Lipset (1973; 1990) have identified certain broad cultural characteristics commonly shared by what they call ‘new societies’ or ‘settler societies’ – including Iceland. These cultures, they argue, generally share a strong sense of individualism, emphasize self-help and independence, resent central authority and emphasize equality. They are often “rugged, materialistic and achievement oriented” (Ólafsson, 2003: 1). Although respondents’ frequent emphasis on self-sufficiency and independence may have something to do with Iceland’s status as a ‘settler society’, their responses also suggested that a sense of independence has been woven into current understandings of the act of fishing, fishing communities, and those who live there – with significant implications for the debate over ITQ management.

## 5.4 National identity

### 5.4.1 Independence, sovereignty, & ownership

To a certain extent, some respondents see fishing as an embodiment and symbol of the nation itself – a key and easily recognizable aspect of Iceland’s heritage, culture and identity. This can be seen in statements like that of Respondent G, who suggested, “It’s like... the fishery is like... it *is* Iceland, do you know what I mean?” More specifically, however, respondents linked the fisheries to a sense of national independence and self-sufficiency. Iceland, isolated geographically and characterized by a relatively hostile topography and climate, has depended on its fisheries to drive economic development and build prosperity as an independent nation (see Chapter 4). Respondent H, noting Iceland’s remoteness, argued that fisheries are necessary to the nation’s survival: “You can’t live on a very remote island like Iceland without this.”

According to respondents, the association between fisheries and national independence was perhaps most pronounced during the four ‘cod wars’ between Iceland and Great Britain, during which Iceland fought to expel foreign vessels from local fishing grounds and gradually extend the country’s EEZ to 200 nautical miles. At the time, claiming sovereign control over fishing grounds and, thereby, the fishery resource, was linked to strong feelings of nationalism. Several respondents described the Cod Wars as a proud moment in which Iceland laid claim to the resources necessary for self-sufficiency and national prosperity. “I think it was a common belief in Iceland that we should have the right to protect the waters – the fishing waters,” said Respondent H. “It was the only resource, really, that we could rely on. We didn’t have any gold, or silver, or coal, or anything but the fish.” Her use of the word ‘protect’ indicates her belief that Iceland extended the EEZ not only to claim exclusive access to resources, but also to prevent them from being overfished. A collapse in cod stocks would have been devastating. Claiming sovereign control over its fishing grounds, therefore, was also a way for Iceland to exert control over its own destiny. As Pálsson (1998) expressed it, “Icelanders claimed national ownership of the fishing stocks in coastal waters, in an attempt to carve a territorial as well as a symbolic space for themselves in the larger world. The culmination of these events was frequently described by Icelanders as the final stage of the Icelandic nation’s struggle for independence,” (pp. 284).

Interestingly, although several respondents expressed doubt that most Icelanders feel that same kind of intense nationalistic pride regarding the fisheries today, similar links between fisheries and national sovereignty are sometimes expressed by current quota holders in the context of discussions regarding the possibility of Iceland joining the European Union (EU) - potentially 'surrendering' the ability to manage its own fisheries. Respondent D noted that, "if you listen to how people talk about the EU, you can hear it coming through. What people are most scared of is that we will lose control over our fishing grounds. And that's of course part of it. So you can hear it very clearly." Now, argued Respondent B, such ties to national independence are voiced mainly by fishing companies and quota holders:

"I would say at the time of the cod wars it had a really strong tie to people's feeling of independence. But I think it is less so now, because – maybe because those companies nowadays – the big companies that own most of the quotas, I think they have this feeling and that's why they are fighting against the European Union. But maybe people today just take this for granted, so they don't think about it in the same way as in 1975."

Objections to joining the European Union include the fact that entry would mean observing Community fishing policies and regulations. According to Zarilli (2011), although after the financial crisis, the new government put entry into the EU high on the national agenda, such a move would be seen by many as comparable to relinquishing sovereignty.

## **5.5 Regional identity**

In addition to personal characteristics and qualities, respondents also associated the fishery with a sense of *regional* identity – once again dominated by notions of independence and self-sufficiency. Although some scholars have noted that Icelanders in other regions tend to look down on Westfjords residents (Skaptadóttir, 2007), the vast majority of respondents expressed a sense of regional pride and identity. When speaking about the Westfjords, they made it clear that they consider the region to be a unique and culturally distinct location – an area with its own identity apart from the rest of Iceland. Many noted a marked cultural difference between the Westfjords and more urban areas – particularly Reykjavik – that distinguishes both villages and inhabitants. Characteristics associated with the Westfjords and those who live there included an independence born of geographic isolation and a sense of personal freedom.

“It is a lot different to be raised up here than in Reykjavik,” noted Respondent G, because the culture of each location is entirely different. In the Westfjords, “you are isolated. You have much more freedom.”

Several respondents specifically associated the self-sufficiency and independence of the Westfjords with fisheries, citing the region’s dependence on marine resources. Although other parts of Iceland contain geothermal energy resources, or large rivers and waterfalls suitable for hydroelectric power generation, the Westfjords have access to few natural resources beyond fish. In interviews, respondents repeatedly expressed a sense of independence and isolation associated with this comparative lack of resources, as well as a perception that the region must be able to survive and operate largely on its own.

“I feel that Reykjavik doesn’t care about the Westfjords,” confessed Respondent A, “because basically, what do the Westfjords really have to do with Reykjavik? [People in Reykjavik] have a lot of the resources for themselves that don’t come from here. They have hot spring water, they have an ocean around them, so they don’t really need to come here for fish... In essence, I think it’s like every man for himself with every region of Iceland.”

Respondent E agreed:

“In other areas they have agriculture and the main waterfalls are really on the mainland of Iceland. Even in electricity we are a bit handicapped just because the lines from mainland Iceland over to our area are quite sensitive to bad weather... We don’t have as much geothermal water or waterfalls as the mainland. That is one of the reasons why we have always been very dependent on fisheries.”

This respondent’s use of the (technically inappropriate) word ‘mainland’ emphasizes his perception of the Westfjords as a kind of virtual island – comparatively isolated, independent and distinct from the rest of the country. Respondents embedded discussions regarding the effects of the ITQ system within broader narratives that framed it as part of a larger pattern: a shift toward increasing marginalization as control over elements of governance, finance and culture become centralized in Reykjavik. Respondent G perceived this shift, as well as a corresponding decrease in the Westfjords’ ability to articulate and assert its own identity and

interests. “Everything is aimed more and more – like, everything is controlled from Reykjavík. They are now even talking about having – in the next election – to have Iceland as just one [voting district].” His opposition to such political incorporation highlights his desire to maintain a sense of independence and local control – to protect a distinct identity, political as well as cultural, for the Westfjords. “Sometimes when you listen to the news you can hear it and sense it – they just want Iceland to be – for people to live in Reykjavík and close to Reykjavík.”

In his view, a gradual decline in available services such as airport transportation illustrates the shift toward increased dependence on Reykjavík: “I mean, it’s not that many years ago that there was a flight to Patreksfjörður and Bíldudalur and Hólmavík. But now it’s just from Ísafjörður.” Not only is air travel within the Westfjords no longer widely available, but in order to travel anywhere else in Iceland by plane, one must fly through the capital. Already, he noted, inhabitants of the Westfjords put up with much less in terms of infrastructure than might be tolerated elsewhere: “As I know quite well, the roads from Ísafjörður to, for example, Patreksfjörður, which is about 120-130 km, which is not really far away, they are just closed 6,7,8 months a year... I mean, would people accept this in Reykjavík? No.” The milk factory in Ísafjörður closed in March, he continued. Now, a truck from Reykjavík picks up milk from Westfjords farmers and brings it back to the city to be processed, only to be delivered back to the Westfjords. This can mean a significant decrease in self-sufficiency. Just a few weeks earlier, he explained, “the hill was closed for two days – we were out of cream, we were out of milk. Maybe that is the next step also, just to close farms here in the Westfjords, one by one.” In this narrative, the respondent perceives the ITQ system as a major driver of increasing marginalization and dependence, threatening the qualities of self-sufficiency and freedom that most respondents identified as what they value most about the Westfjords.

Despite these concerns, Respondent H stressed that the maintenance and sustainability of rural villages in the Westfjords is not a matter of supplication, and should not be seen that way. Villagers do not wish to be pitied, she explained – again linking fishing to regional independence: “We can do it independently. We are not really taking anything away from the people living in Reykjavík - not at all. We pay everything. I think we *earn* it. Fishermen, and others who are not fishermen – supporting them in many ways.” The effort to secure services

and maintain community viability in the Westfjords, she went on, can sometimes be misunderstood by those in other parts of the country as a bid for charity:

“It’s as if Reykjavík thinks that we want – that we are like beggars...It’s as if they are saying, ‘Oh, we are going to be good to you – you can receive something from us.’ Which is not good because the fishermen here and everybody here – I think they are very hardworking people... and proud people.”

Such responses echo Larson’s 2004 study of a small resource-dependent community in British Columbia. There, he writes, notions of community identity based on a sense of isolation represent a form of resistance to economic and social change: “The central quality of Southside’s resistant identity is isolation, both real and perceived. Residents use this trait to establish a sense of communal self-worth by distinguishing their region from the province’s urban areas where most people enjoy modern amenities and accouterments,” (pp. 951). In a similar sense, respondents in the Westfjords speak with pride of the region’s isolation, independence and distinct culture – expressing, perhaps, an element of resistance to a perceived consolidation of power in Reykjavík.

## **5.6 Personal identity**

### **5.6.1 Danger, courage & masculinity**

At the individual level, many respondents associated the act of fishing with personal characteristics such as bravery, courage and skill, making repeated reference to the perceived masculinity of the work and those who do it. Respondent H proudly recalled her grandfather and great-grandfather, both fishing captains from Flateyri, as brave men who dared to go to sea in treacherous winter conditions, putting their lives at risk in order to provide a better life for their families. Fishers, noted Respondent G, occupy a heroic and almost legendary place in Icelandic culture. “If you read some old Icelandic stories,” he explained, “it’s always the fishermen – the men are out fishing in really bad weather. It’s so macho to be a fisherman.”

Although he comes from a family with no immediate ties to the fishery, Respondent G admires the legends, as well as the men (and women) who embody this sense of masculinity and bravery today. In Westfjords communities, he noted, fishing can be seen as a dangerous occupation: “it’s like, so macho. ‘Yeah, I’m a fisherman, of course.’... It’s so much salary because ... it’s such a hardcore, life-threatening job... It’s like the world’s hardest job.” This last comment, made partly in jest, references popular American television programs chronicling – and glorifying – fishers in the North Pacific, illustrating the fact that the mythological heroism associated with fishing in the Westfjords is by no means unique to Iceland. In fact, such associations have been documented in other fisheries around the world. Acheson (1981) notes that the perceived psychological characteristics of fishermen “show remarkable similarities cross-culturally. There is substantial evidence that fishermen in many societies are aggressive, courageous, and independent” (pp. 296) and that fishery participants often partake in “extreme masculine display” (Orbach, 1977). In the context of this study, however, the question of whether or not fishermen actually possess these qualities is less important than whether they are *perceived* to possess them.

Elements of the ITQ controversy reflect the link between fishing and masculinity. Interestingly, a vessel with no quota share of its own – one that must operate solely on the basis of leased rights - can be referred to as a ‘eunuch’ (*geldingur*) (Helgason and Pálsson, 1997: 457). A lack of fishing rights thus becomes a marker of diminishment. In common parlance, a vessel owner that must lease from others is stripped of his/her perceived masculinity and independence – an important piece of a fisher’s identity according to respondents.

The intangible qualities of masculinity and courage cited by respondents also relate to a history of tragedy and sacrifice, which makes up a large part of the fishery’s symbolic importance and associative significance. “It’s also about this losing life, which obviously happened sometimes, that you lost some relatives to the sea,” explained Respondent H, recalling an infamous event in 1812 when “all these boats went down... in the same day – in the sea.” Her reference to the tragedy takes into account not only those who died at sea, but also the family members and communities they left behind: “In the whole area there were about fifty widows left with children”, all of whom had to survive and adapt. This suggests the degree to which such tragedy can be understood as a shared, collective event and thus part of a broader identity that shapes entire villages. Although the Icelandic fishing industry has

changed dramatically during the past century, reducing much of the danger once inherent to taking to the North Atlantic in open row boats, the legacy of tragedy and sacrifice associated with such courage and peril remains an integral part of fishing's perceived significance.

### **5.6.2 Independence and self-sufficiency**

Finally, nearly all respondents associated fisheries and fishers with a perceived sense of independence and self-sufficiency. Respondent H emphasized the historical context of these characteristics, illustrating through a series of stories detailing the development of Westfjords fisheries that in her view, qualities of self-sufficiency, resourcefulness and independence have always been integral to Westfjords fishers, their families, and the communities they helped create. She spoke with pride and admiration of the fierce courage and strength required of the earliest fishing families – including her own - who chose to settle in a remote, relatively inhospitable environment in the hopes of creating a better life for themselves. Her ancestors built a house in what is now Flateyri in 1856, living alone on the small strip of lowland she calls “the gray gravel” for nearly thirty years until another family joined them:

“At the time of the settlement,” she explained, “people were sort of spread all over the coastline. And there were no towns – no towns, no villages, even – just individual homes. They had to be very self-sufficient. I mean, they had to have a milking cow, they had to have some sheep. And they would go on the vessels they had.”

In this version of history, the self-sufficiency and strength possessed by the first fishing families led to the eventual development of the villages that exist today, making these characteristics a fundamental piece of perceived heritage and contemporary identity - at least for Respondent H. A second element linking fisheries to personal independence relates to the period during which Icelandic farm laborers began to break free of feudal restrictions. Respondent H explained that Danish colonial law bound non-landowners to those for whom they worked and prohibited them from building their own farmhouses or starting out on their own unless they could pay a large sum of money (see Chapter 4). She recounted the story of Jón Sigurðsson, an Icelandic statesman native to the Westfjords who pushed for Icelandic independence and became an icon of the independence movement. Part of his efforts, explained Respondent H, included urging Icelanders to free themselves by investing in vessels and becoming fishermen. Thus the transition from agriculture to coastal fishing represented an

avenue for escape and self-sufficiency for those individuals who did not own land. For Respondent H, the development of Westfjords villages is thus linked to an assertion of freedom and independence:

“So more and more vessels would enter and people would move from the green grass farm, you know, to a place like Flateyri. There was no green grass there – it was just gravel - gray gravel. And they would settle down in the gray gravel, but they could make a living there which was far better financially than working for the farmer if you were not a farmer yourself... they had the possibility of having a better life.”

This cultural memory of serfdom and of the link between fishing and an opportunity to build better, more independent lives reverberates throughout the modern debate over the ITQ system, a phenomenon documented by Helgason and Pálsson (1997). They describe the development of an elaborate vocabulary of feudal metaphors likening the leasing of fishing rights from quota holders to the old feudal system. The practice of ITQ leasing – or ‘fishing for others’ (*veiða fyrir aðra*) – entails smaller operators without fishing rights signing contracts with larger ITQ holders (often vertically-integrated companies). The small-scale operator often pays a lease price equivalent to nearly half the value of the catch. Icelandic public discourse employed metaphors to describe the leasing process as a system of tenancy (*lénskerfi*), likening quota holders to medieval landlords and small-scale lessee operators to tenants or serfs (*leigulidar*). Owners of the biggest fishing companies were referred to as ‘quota kings’ (*kvótakóngar*) and ‘lords of the sea’ (*sægreifar*) – reflecting fear and resentment of concentrated power in the hands of a few individuals and companies (Helgason and Pálsson, 1997: 456).

Respondents here used similar metaphors, referring to feudalism as an embarrassing return to an anachronistic and unjust past – a sociopolitical system that should have been eradicated from modern society centuries ago. As Respondent I explained:

“It’s feudalism – it was supposed to be extinct from Europe hundreds of years ago, but then it came up in fishing in Iceland a few decades ago... It’s the biggest injustice that we’ve ever seen. It’s the biggest theft that we’ve ever seen. You know, we’re actually – in this aspect – we are back to feudalism. We

really, really are back to feudalism. And, you know, you have to be lacking something if you don't get emotional about this.”

His use of the word ‘theft’ refers to the perception that the ITQ system strips Icelanders of something that belongs to them – in this case, their right to access and profit from fishery resources. By linking the ITQ system to Iceland’s feudal history, however, some respondents suggest that something even less tangible – but perhaps more important - has been ‘stolen’: their independence and self-sufficiency. This idea of a means of independence being ‘stolen’ was echoed by several respondents who associated small-boat fishing, in particular, with personal independence and freedom. Respondent J linked the more traditional, small-boat fleet to the dreams and aspirations of individuals, arguing that many people in the Westfjords dream of buying a small boat and going fishing in order to assert their independence:

“You lived in Ísafjörður. You must know that there are so many people from... parts of this – how do you say – ‘neck of the woods’, that would love to buy a boat and start fishing. And this is understandable. And this is, as a matter of fact, one of the reasons why we still have this huge debate about the ITQ system in Iceland. There are so many people that have this dream. And all of a sudden, the dream was taken away from them. And they hate having someone come overnight and steal their dream.”

Although his response reflects to some degree the viewpoint of an organization dedicated to obtaining increased fishing rights for the small boat fleet – and his comments must be interpreted within that context – it does hint at the degree to which debate and discussion regarding the ITQ system have been infused and overlaid with broader notions of identity and personal agency. From his perspective, the debate over ITQs has been so virulent because it is perceived by individuals in regions like the Westfjords as an assault on both their history of and aspirations for independence.

### **5.6.3 Drudgery & limitation**

It must be noted, however, that not all respondents appreciated or condoned the glorification of fishing, nor did they associate fisheries with a sense of personal freedom. Differences in responses highlight an interesting tension between alternate perceptions of the fishery; where

some saw heroism and independence, others saw drudgery and limitation. This suggests that fisheries in the Westfjords can represent either freedom or constriction depending on the context and perspective of the observer. Respondent F, for example, recalled with good-humored bitterness the time he spent baiting hooks as a child, embedded in a culture that celebrated the fishery and those who participated in it, but unwilling to share in the romanticism. Although his father was a fisherman, he objected to the fact that fisheries and fishermen were so often portrayed as heroes:

“I hated it... It was in songs and, you know, you had it on the radio where you sent in... ‘give my best regards to Jón who’s on the sea fishing’ and things like that. And then they play some bloody fish song, you know? I hated it.”

While he admitted that fishermen at the time most likely deserved to be considered heroes because “they were the kind of people drowning and things like that during the winters,” he associated the fishing industry with a personal sense of stagnation and entrapment. “I didn’t find anything heroic about it. I found it slavery, with no way of getting out – unless you go to school.” For him, the fisheries represented something to escape or rise above through education and personal advancement. Independence lay elsewhere.

Other respondents expressed a similar idea, associating the modern Icelandic fishing industry with drudgery and hardship – not only for the fishermen but also for the people working onshore in processing factories and related industries. In Reykjavík, explained Respondent A, there are enough job opportunities that fishing has become a “last resort” for many Icelanders. Only those with nothing else to do, or with little education are forced to leave their “comfort zone to go actually out there in shitty weather and all that.” Icelandic women, she continued, don’t often dream of growing up to work in a processing plant. The fishing industry has become a place for people that “didn’t go to school, didn’t learn a specific thing, so they’re not educated in a specific area... it’s a last resort.” As Relph (1975) notes, however, perceptions of drudgery are almost always part of a profound attachment to place. As respondents’ narratives have already demonstrated a link between fisheries and place, it must be at least considered possible that such assertions of drudgery do not necessarily negate or contradict an attachment to the fisheries, but rather highlight their pervasive cultural influence.

## **6 Perceived impacts of the ITQ system: Effects on 'fate control'**

Having discussed the values, characteristics, and significance respondents associate with the fisheries (Chapters 5), this chapter examines the ways in which respondents articulate and understand what they perceive to be the major impacts of the ITQ system in the Westfjords. Although a substantial body of literature exists addressing the structural and demographic changes associated with consolidation of quotas, growing wealth disparity and geographic shifts in quota ownership (e.g. Benediktsson and Karlsdóttir, 2011; Jónsdóttir and Knútsson, 2009; Eythórsson, 1996; Skaptadóttir, 2000, 2007; Pálsson and Helgason, 1996; Pálsson and Pétursdóttir, 1997), this chapter focuses on one perceived impact in particular – one that ran throughout respondents' narratives as a recurring and underlying theme. Again and again, respondents brought up feelings of powerlessness, linking the implementation of the ITQ system to a sense of losing control over various aspects of their lives, as well as their ability to influence the future. Other respondents, however, indicated that for those who do hold quota shares, the system has led to an *increased* ability to exert control over business practices and personal decisions. This thesis refers to this as 'fate control' – a term borrowed from the 2004 Arctic Human Development Report and defined as the ability of individuals "to determine their own destinies" (Young and Einarsson, 2004: 17). This chapter attempts to explore the significance of this idea by identifying and exploring the ways in which respondents talked about fate control at various scales. Common themes identified include a perceived loss of respondents' control over the fate of their communities – as well as their own futures, and a feeling of entrapment.

### **6.1 Loss of control over the fate of fishing communities**

#### **6.1.1 Consolidation of control over ITQs – and the future**

Various respondents repeatedly used the word 'fear' to describe the feelings of villagers, in most cases related to an alarming sense of losing control over the future of their communities. Respondents linked this – at least in part - to a perception that the ITQ system, by consolidating quotas in the hands of a few owners, also consolidates the power to determine

the fate of entire communities, leaving those without quota – whether former fishermen or other community members - feeling stripped of personal agency. Respondent C stressed that while most of those who oppose the ITQ system recognize the need to limit and control fishing effort somehow, “people are against the fact that one or two individuals can make a decision to sell a natural resource away from a community so that the community is left with almost nothing. That is the main criticism here.” Control of quota is perceived to carry with it the power to make decisions affecting entire communities of people who have no say in the trading process. “What people are most afraid of,” explained Respondent D, “is that you might have one company that owns all the quota and they decide to quit and sell off everything. And nobody else can buy it because they don’t have the capacity to do it.” Such an event would have severe implications for fishing villages, noted Respondent B. Now, he says, after years of watching the population of local fishing villages gradually decrease, some inhabitants fear that it is only a matter of time before the communities themselves collapse:

[We] fear [we] are “nearing a breaking point where the assets, or people’s houses and stuff, suddenly get depreciated very fast and people just hurry away – not to be the last one... Yeah, so suddenly, you can have a slow decrease over the years and then suddenly something happens and everyone moves away.”

Respondent B’s use of the phrase “suddenly something happens” highlights the lack of control he feels. Einarsson (2011) identified among inhabitants of Icelandic fishing villages a similar sense of loss associated with “the accumulation of not only great wealth but also disproportionate and democratically unjustifiable power over the lives of people,” (pp. 131). Control of access over fishery resources becomes, in effect, control over much more than that.

### **6.1.2 A perceived shift in social responsibility**

For some, this perceived consolidation of control over the fate of communities violates a sense of traditional social obligation, illustrating the extent to which respondents associate the ITQ system with a change in the kinds of relationships that exist between individuals. Several respondents voiced a sense of betrayal, implying that the ITQ system, by placing disproportionate power in the hands of quota holders, has severed traditional ties of dependence and trust between vessel owners, skippers and crews – as well as the broader communities they inhabit. Respondent H, for example, seemed troubled by the fact that quota

holders in her small village could sell their shares to an individual or company in another part of Iceland without consulting anyone else in the community. She recounted the story of one such owner: “all decisions were his. He didn’t have to ask anybody. But he made a good profit out of it, I’m told.”

When discussing quota holders who have sold quota ‘away’ from a community, many respondents voiced a sense that they should have shown more ‘responsibility’ for the village and the workers who depended on the industry for employment. When the fish factory closed in her village following a quota transfer, said Respondent H, her brother felt disappointed and betrayed:

“He felt that [the seller] should have shown more responsibility for the people living in the village because it was thanks to them that he had, you know, got a good profit from his business... And he didn’t really care. He just sold and then he moved away. So, that’s what happens.”

Respondent E, owner of a fishing company and supporter of the ITQ system, noted a similar change in conceptions of social responsibility, but described it as a gradual shift in the goals and philosophies of the fishing industry. According to him, fishing companies like the one his family founded in 1941 were originally much more financially and socially embedded in the communities and municipalities in which they were located. His family, he said, started their company not only to make a profit, but also “to create jobs for the people in the village... That was how it was through the decades – it was always mainly for families.” He describes a traditional sense of social responsibility and identity linking corporations to certain areas – in this case municipalities – but believes that this connection has been largely severed in recent decades. Several scholars have remarked on related changes. According to Eythórsson (1996), the implementation of the ITQ system facilitated a shift in the relationship between fishing communities and the fishing industry, prompting a shift from production embedded in local communities to a more mobile, global industry. “The consolidation of power” associated with the ITQ system, noted Benediktsson and Karlsdóttir (2011), “severed the links between locality and resource” (pp. 233).

Respondent F sees evidence of a similar shift in the evolving relationships between vessel owners, captains and crew. When his father worked as a fisherman, he explained, the mutual dependence between these groups was more openly acknowledged. Skippers, including his

father, worked on the same boat for the same vessel owner, for years. “So there was a kind of gentlemen’s agreement between the captains and the owner of the boat or whatever, and the [fishers] – because they were so dependent on each other, you know.” But with the implementation of the ITQ system, “Suddenly the guy there, he owns the boat, he has the quotas, he has everything – he has a lot of money and he can hire whichever one he wants.” In his view, the ITQ system places disproportionate power in the hands of the vessel owner – thereby diminishing traditional ties of solidarity and mutual dependence between them and their crews.

Helgason and Pálsson (1997) discuss the ways in which relationships between various participants in the fishing industry changed as a result of the ITQ system’s privileging capital over labor. Whereas once skippers had been valued for their ability to bring large catches to shore, the ITQ system involved a shift in emphasis from valuing and rewarding expertise and skill to valuing characteristics like business acumen. They suggest that this rift between boat owners and their employees contributed to certain elements of opposition to the system, citing one fisher who declared: “It necessarily adds a devilish aspect to the system when people can rent their quota and then just relax in bed,” (pp. 465). Respondents voiced similar objections to the role of quota holders. Respondent J lamented:

“What has happened is that in Iceland we have all of a sudden all these guys that are just staying on the pier – sitting in a Land Cruiser or smoking cigars and seeing his pile of boats go out and fish. Paying low salaries, selling the fish for extremely high prices and making a lot of money – this is not what the small-scale fishery is all about.”

Similarly, several respondents noted a severing of ties between quota holders and the people who work in processing plants. According to Respondent D, the ITQ system fails to recognize the degree to which a fishing operation’s success and profit depends on those working in the factories:

“The ones who are left out of the quota system are the ones who are working ... in the factories – because they were the ones that also took part in making the quota possible for the fishermen. They will never get anything. So it’s a pity if you look at it from that side. And of course

people know it. If they hadn't been there to process the fish, they wouldn't have built up a quota.”

He objects to the perception that accumulation of control over quota shares – along with the financial assets it entails – depends on the hard work of those on boats and in factories, but does not in any sense ‘belong’ to them or, arguably, benefit them if the owner chooses to transfer his quota elsewhere.

### **6.1.3 Suddenness and unpredictability of ITQ trading**

Several respondents who expressed a sense of losing control over the fate of their communities related it to what they consider the rapid and unpredictable nature of ITQ trading. Because fisheries represent a hub of economic and social activity (see Chapter 5), respondents perceive changes in the control and distribution of quota shares to affect the welfare and stability of all community members – and therefore, by extension, the viability of entire villages. Using phrases such as “all of a sudden” and “just overnight”, respondents emphasized the suddenness with which quota shares can be sold to an individual or corporation outside a community, causing large-scale changes rapidly and with little warning. To illustrate this point, Respondent G recounted the story of Bolungarvík – once one of the richest fishing villages in the Westfjords:

“It was one of the richest, and had so many houses – like everything new - like a really good fish factory and all that. And then just overnight, the guy sold it. Sold it, or whatever happened – at least it went away from Bolungarvík. And overnight a few hundred people just lost their jobs and the fishing vessels went away and everything went bankrupt.”

His narrative illustrates the perceived volatility and sudden, massive impact that a transfer of quota ownership can have on a community, literally leveling the entire economic structure of a village and leaving individuals and families without employment. “It goes like *this*,” explained Respondent B, snapping his fingers, “you never know with the quota system – a company can be sold.”

## 6.2 Loss of control over personal fate: growing wealth disparity and a decrease in socioeconomic mobility

Respondents also cited a perceived loss of control over their own individual futures, related to the role the ITQ system has played in consolidating fishing rights and fostering increased wealth disparity. Respondent F identified growing disparity in quota control, although he argued that such effects were in some ways inevitable:

“Everybody who thought a little bit knew at those times... that when the fisheries are divided up in quotas, connected to each boat, it will automatically happen that the bigger boats who have more money will buy up the smaller ones. And it has of course ended up that we don't have any quota and the quotas are gone and blah, blah, blah. And there are about ten families who own the whole bloody thing here in Iceland – it's ridiculous.”

According to him, this growing disparity exists not only between community members, but also “between families, inside families” – straining social bonds and contributing to social discord. He understands this disparity not only in terms of monetary wealth, however – but in terms of access rights. He identified differences in rights – not financial assets – as the main source of bitterness and conflict: It “makes people more disputable and conflictable (*sic*),” he explained, “which made people go away because they couldn't live side by side when this guy had... this *right* to go there, but I can't.” Although he was careful to acknowledge that villages in the Westfjords, much like any other human community, have never been entirely harmonious, he stressed his belief that ITQs have fundamentally altered social relations by driving individuals apart.

According to some respondents, this has significant impacts on individual fate control. Growing disparity – combined with the structure of the ITQ market, argued Respondent F, diminishes the ability of individuals who do not hold quota shares to change their socioeconomic position. Before ITQs, he explained, someone working on a fishing boat always had the option of saving his money or getting a loan that would enable him to start fishing for himself – opening up new avenues of entrepreneurship and giving him more power over his own career. Once quota shares became tradable commodities, however, prices skewed so dramatically high that those options disappeared for most individuals not initially included in the allocation process.

This notion echoes arguments made by Macinko (1993) that an ITQ system can alter class structure and chances for individual social advancement; passage up this “modified ladder”, he notes, would be most difficult for relatively marginal participants in the fisheries (pp. 950). Although in the context of his 1993 study, Macinko was referring mainly to Native Alaskans and women, respondents here implied they perceive a similar disadvantage for Icelandic small boat fishers and anyone who did not originally receive quota shares. Respondent F’s description of control over fishing rights as a way of advancing in the world and asserting independence echoes the qualities respondents associated with fishing in Chapter 5. In his view, the ITQ system, by reducing individuals’ abilities to access fishing rights, represents a violation and denial of much of what fishing represents to him: freedom, independence and a road to self-improvement.

### **6.2.1 Increased fate control for quota holders**

It is important to note, however, that those individuals who do hold quota shares can experience the impacts of the ITQ system as an *increase* in fate control. The “beauty of the ITQ system”, explained Respondent E, is that it enables fishers and fishing companies to exercise better judgment and to control their own business practices:

“I can make an agreement with a customer: ‘Ok, I can deliver 50 tons a month with this quota over 12 months of the year – it can be fresh or frozen.’ I know I have the rights to fish – to catch this – and I decide what days I’ll catch it and deliver it... More efficient, more stable, and it helps us to maximize with what you can get out of the resource.”

The fact that both individuals with and without quota emphasize the importance of being able to sense and exercise some form of control over the future – whether in terms of community development, personal livelihood or industrial practices – emphasizes the degree to which the struggle for fate control shapes this controversy from both sides.

## **6.3 Feeling ‘trapped’**

Several respondents perceived and articulated the loss of fate control as a sensation of entrapment. Many inhabitants of fishing villages do not like the ITQ system, they explained, but fear that any changes will only make things worse for communities already struggling to

maintain their economic and social viability – fostering among individuals a sense of being ‘trapped’ by a system they do not like but cannot change. Respondent B, for example, supports reforming the system in theory but cautioned that, “You always fear, of course, that something will be wrong with the changes so they will make you even worse off – that’s what people say.” Respondent F cited the relative safety of the known over the unknown: “People are very afraid of changing... because they know what they have, they know what’s coming, but they don’t know what they will get instead – what is it? So that’s why they keep on with these old things.” As a result, argued Respondent B, inhabitants of coastal villages often worry that pushing for any change might endanger the few fishing rights they do have:

“The feeling amongst the people of the smaller towns – fisheries towns – is that this is so sensitive you shouldn’t try to change it because then you might lose everything. So they say, ‘don’t disturb the quota system,’ even though they’ve been opposed to it for decades... And the trap is that now maybe they are losing all their quotas...and so when they’ve finally lost it, then it’s too late to fight for it... So yeah, they really are trapped.”

Especially now, cautioned several respondents, with the Icelandic economy particularly vulnerable, some people hesitate to advocate for change because they fear it might hurt the profitability of the fishing industry and therefore the country’s chances of recovering from the financial crisis. Respondent G recalled that when the government’s plan to gradually reclaim quota from individuals was first proposed, it attracted broad support:

“Everyone was like, ‘Yes, let’s do it.’ But then people are now getting a little more hesitant... I think it’s basically because when the political parties started to speak out and say the consequences it will lead to, people got a bit scared that we might ruin our chance of, like, bouncing back from this bank crisis.”

Indeed, various respondents suggested that the sense of being ‘trapped’ intensified after the collapse of the Icelandic financial sector. As Respondent B recalled, in the years leading up to the Crisis, Icelandic banks launched a campaign to encourage small fishing companies to purchase quota shares: “They would loan the money in foreign currency – cheap loans – and the people would then buy quotas – small companies, like family companies and stuff, like one here in Flateyri. They lend you the money and you buy quotas.” This simultaneously

drove up the value of quota and led to immense profits for the banks, he explained. When the financial sector collapsed, everything changed:

“In 2008 when everything crashed, the people in these small companies – even *hating* the quota system – were suddenly highly indebted; they had nothing but this small quota that didn’t even suffice as a mortgage for the loan... They were opposed to the quota system but they feared that if you change anything... so that’s a real trap.”

## 7 Identifying & articulating 'rights' at national, community and individual levels

This chapter examines how respondents understand and articulate 'rights' in the context of Icelandic fisheries management. Although many respondents brought up similar conceptions of 'rights', the diversity of their responses illustrates the fact that rights can be interpreted differently by various individuals and groups and, in various contexts, "construed and constructed in numerous ways" (Clay and Olson, 2008: 150). Throughout their narratives, respondents revealed the complexity of various issues as they discussed a set of perceived rights, freedoms and obligations that collide, coexist and contradict one another at various scales. Navigating this tangle of perceived 'rights' and interests requires an understanding of how they are perceived and articulated in various contexts.

The kind of 'right' conferred by an ITQ has long been debated. Since the 1980s, certain economists have referred to ITQs as property rights (Scott, 1989). According to the Icelandic government, however, ITQs do not represent private property, but rather temporary use rights. The first paragraph of the 1990 Fisheries Management Act stipulates that commercial fish stocks in Icelandic waters represent the common property (*sameign*) of the Icelandic people, and that allocation of fishing rights "shall not give rise to property rights or irrevocable domination of individuals over fishing licenses" (cited and translated by Einarsson, 2011: 113). Gissurarson (2000) argues that ITQs are a kind of substitute for property rights: "They are not exclusive rights to the utilization of particular areas of the sea, or of particular fish, but rather exclusive rights to harvest... They are rights of extraction rather than property," (pp. 39). Throughout their discussions of fisheries, respondents' repeated referrals to 'owners' of ITQs indicates, however, that the concept of ITQs as private property does exist – despite the FMA's declarations to the contrary, echoing Einarsson's (2011) concept of cognitive dissonance. The Icelandic term for 'common property of the nation' with reference to fish stocks, he writes, "has acquired an ironic, even a sarcastic meaning, as often expressed in conjunction with a smile or a wink by native speakers," (pp. 121). This apparent contradiction between the *de facto* and *de jure* status of fish stocks gives rise to "an official version or representation of equality, fairness and common good, but with a very different reality," (Einarsson, 2011: 121-122). Respondents' discussions of their 'rights' - including those perceived to be sanctioned by the state (for example, when respondents cite a right they believe is guaranteed by the Icelandic Constitution), as well as rights they believe *should* be

recognized - echo this complexity. The chapter's structure reflects three scales at which respondents identified 'rights' within the fishery: national, regional and individual.

## **7.1 National rights**

All respondents recognized – to at least some degree – the right of the Icelandic state to claim control over fishery resources, although individual responses varied as to the form and extent of that right. In other words, respondents agreed that Icelandic fisheries constitute a national resource, but disagreed over what that *means*, both in theory and in practice. The unanimous recognition of at least some degree of national ownership, however, likely reflects in part the associations with Icelandic independence, self-sufficiency, and identity discussed in Chapter 6. The principle of common use rights for all citizens carries heavy symbolic weight in Iceland, note Helgason and Pálsson (1997), similar to the 'Public Trust Doctrine' in the United States: "In both cases, notions of common access to fishing space carry a heavy symbolic load, combining concerns for national sovereignty with those of equity and personal autonomy," (pp. 463). In many cases, respondents identified the perception that the ITQ system violates this concept of national common property as their most fundamental objection to the system.

### **7.1.1 The ITQ system as a violation of national & public rights**

Respondents often linked their emphasis on national rights of control to a conviction that fish cannot really be 'owned' at all - and that the very concept would be inappropriate given the nature and significance of the resource. Respondent G explained that many Icelanders object to the idea of companies owning fish in the sea "because fish is fish and nobody owns the fish." Respondent A voiced a similar objection to the concept of ownership, explaining that fish lie somewhere outside the range of commodity goods. Respondents' resistance to the application of 'ownership' within the fishery echoes a long history of opposition within Euro-American culture to the process of commoditization (Gudeman, 1992; Helgason and Pálsson, 1997). Traditional Icelandic conceptions of common use fisheries, argues Pálsson (1991), include the idea that fish can only become commodities if they are caught. The allocation of quota shares representing access to a store of fish *as yet uncaught* thus violates common understandings of ownership rights.

Often, however, respondents expressed opposition to the idea of ‘ownership’ in complex and seemingly contradictory ways. Respondent A explained, “I don’t know, I guess I would just say that all of Iceland owns the fish... It’s just in the same way that you can’t really own water, or... yeah, just everybody owns the fish.” This ambiguous response, which seems to argue simultaneously that fish cannot be ‘owned’, but are owned by all Icelanders, reflects a tension seemingly inherent to conceptions of common property. In this context, the Icelandic state is seen as a stand-in or guardian of the public’s common interest, with several respondents equating ownership by the government with ownership by the population as a whole. Respondent G explained, “we have to try to find some solution so that the quota will one day, in many years, be owned by the people - by the government.” The quota system has worked well in some respects, he continued, but could be improved by “letting the government – which is the people of Iceland – own more and have more rights with the fishing stocks.” Respondent C agreed: “I think in any community in the world, a natural resource should be owned by the nation – by the people. And the ones that are using the natural resource should be renting it from the nation – not from each other. That is a major change that I think should be brought about.” Natural resources, including fish, would therefore belong simultaneously to everyone and no one. According to Respondents C and G, the fact that quota shares can be bought and sold by individuals who can keep profits made during the transfer makes them *de facto* owners, and thereby violates the nation’s right to control. Iceland should be “the owner,” argued Respondent C, “not the figurative owner. You are not the owner if someone else can sell what you own, or rent it out, or use it – then you are not the owner.”

Even those respondents who largely support the structure and continuation of the ITQ system recognized and advocated for some degree of national ownership. Respondent E argued that the ITQ system does not violate the concept of national ownership because fishing companies funnel their profits back into communities through employment, development opportunities, and cash flow. Quota holders are therefore not really ‘owners’, but guardians – managing a public resource as efficiently and as profitably as possible, and then reinvesting in things that benefit the Icelandic public. According to Respondent E, this emphasizes the need to prioritize efficiency and profit for quota holders: “If the company doesn’t keep positive results, then it will be a loss for the community, really – because of all the multiplication effects.”

## **7.2 Community & regional rights**

Respondents also cited perceived rights founded on a sense of place-based ownership at either a regional or community level. Geographic rights to access or control have long played a significant role in various fisheries throughout the world. Acheson (1981) surveys a wide range of global fishery management schemes that have tied particular areas of the ocean to individuals, communities or other entities. He has also described in detail the complex systems of territoriality traditionally used by lobster fishers on the coast of Maine (Acheson, 1975). Throughout their discussions of the ITQ system, respondents expressed a number of opinions regarding the proper role and significance of geographic control in Icelandic fisheries management, many of them articulating a sense that certain rights should belong to municipalities or other land-based entities.

Despite the variety of respondents' suggestions regarding the best and most appropriate way to link fishing rights to geography, almost all identified the importance of spatial claims (in some form) to access or production. Such an approach, although having been long practiced in various parts of the world (Acheson, 1981), is again becoming an important element of modern fisheries management. St. Martin and Hall-Arber (2009) note that management of marine resources is taking an increasingly spatial approach, as "the marine environment is rapidly becoming a collection of habitats, natural processes, multi-stakeholder practices, and use rights that are tied to places" (pp. 3). In this sense, respondents' understandings of access rights tied to villages or regions reflect not only elements of tradition and heritage, but also perhaps an increasingly 'modern' approach.

### **7.2.1 Community rights to access local resources**

According to several respondents, coastal villages should have the right to access or control a certain proportion of fishery resources. Because small towns scattered along the coastline lack the necessary financial resources to compete against large companies in the ITQ market, argued Respondent C, "you have to reserve some right to those communities to the resource that this process took... If they don't use it, then you distribute it to the rest." His reference to the process of 'taking' resources from communities indicates a belief that communities represent – at least to some degree – the rightful possessors of fishing access. Respondent J agreed that granting fishing rights to communities would be the fairest option, particularly since coastal villages were founded on the basis of their proximity to proven fishing grounds,

embedding fishing access in their very foundation (see Chapter 4). Inhabitants of coastal villages, he argued, should enjoy rights of access to the fishing grounds near their communities:

There would be “a certain amount of fishing rights within the community without any individuals or any company – or whatever you call it – owning the rights. It would just be defined that Bolungarvik – four miles out in this circle or whatever - they have the exclusive right to go fishing within this area. Maybe to a certain limit, I mean, they could figure that out for themselves.”

Above all, Respondent J envisioned this form of community control over access as a bulwark against excessive consolidation that threatens to leave rural communities without fishing rights, echoing the United States General Accounting Office (GAO), which concluded that in the context of an ITQ system, the easiest and most direct way to ‘protect’ communities is to allow the communities themselves to hold quota so that they can determine how best to protect their economic viability (GAO, 2004: 3). In fact, the rules of the ITQ system already recognize some degree of community rights – at least in theory, and were designed to afford municipalities the opportunity to purchase quota shares before they could be transferred to an individual or corporation somewhere else. In practice, however, these rules have done little to prevent quota shares from exiting communities. According to analysis by the GAO (2004), firms have often managed to bypass the rule by selling entire companies to outside buyers – rather than simply vessels and their associated quota. As the market value of quotas rose, many communities that might have benefitted from the rule lacked sufficient funds to purchase available quota shares.

### **7.2.2 An indirect right to ‘benefit’ from local resources**

Respondent B agreed that some kind of place-based conception of rights is both fair and necessary, justifying his position by comparing it to Iceland’s extension of the EEZ. Just as Iceland claimed sovereign control over its surrounding waters, he argued, so should the Westfjords lay claim to its own regional waters. Importantly, however, his definition of ‘control’ does not necessarily mean that inhabitants of the Westfjords should possess an exclusive right to access and harvest resources in local waters. Instead, it means that the region should stand to ‘benefit’ – perhaps even indirectly – from fishing done nearby:

“The Westfjords should benefit from the resources that are swimming outside the Westfjords. Of course you can say that this is right or wrong, but what else would you have? In the rest of Iceland they would say that the fish swimming around Iceland is for Iceland. So in the same way, we would say that the fish around the Westfjords should be, in some way, connected to the Westfjords’ benefit.”

Other respondents articulated a similar vision of looser, more adaptable community fishing rights – based not on strict territorial control, but on the right to access revenue and development funding. According to Respondent G, this means that communities should have the right to process any fish caught in local waters – enabling factories to thrive and fueling development throughout the rest of the community. “The fishing vessels that fish in the sea around Bolungarvík,” he explained, “should process the fish in Bolungarvík – So at least we can keep the fish coming in the municipality the fish is caught in.” In theory, such conceptions of rights would recognize the claims of communities without restricting the transfer of ITQs between individuals and corporations. Respondent I agreed that such policies – focusing on rural development rather than control of quota shares – would be a more effective way of supporting coastal villages and their inhabitants. If the Icelandic government auctioned off quota shares on a periodic basis, he argued, the profits from bidding could be reinvested in fishing communities:

“For me, you know, this – like this special quota for this place and that place – I don’t agree with that. I don’t think it’s a wise thing to do. If you [were] getting between 20 and 30 billion kronur every year [from the auction], you could be supporting [coastal communities] financially in a way that matters – in education and, you know, these small things like health care...that will enrich the community. And it changes – it makes a great change for the country. So if you could only be doing small things like that, I think it’s more effective.”

### **7.2.3 The right to community ‘fate control’**

Finally, respondents linked these various conceptions of geographic rights to what they perceived as the ultimate right of communities to shape their own development and future. Respondent I expressed this idea by likening fishing rights to a set of tools empowering

coastal communities to make their own choices regarding resource use, economic development, and social justice. The concept of fishing rights as tools came up again when Respondent C argued that in order to ensure the possibility of development, every community must have certain ‘minimal rights’ and the freedom to use them as they wish:

“I would like to say like Winston Churchill: ‘Give us the tools and we shall finish the job.’ And the tools are the right to fish. So you have to make it attractive for those that want to fish to build up something in those communities. But once you have taken everything away from them, you don’t attract anything.”

In his view, rights of access to fishery resources give the communities that control them the ability to build up other industries, attract investors and determine a future.

#### **7.2.4 Objections to geographic rights**

At times, however, even those respondents who advocated for some form of geographical rights questioned the fairness of such measures. Much of their indecision stemmed from a hesitancy to strip others of the right to do as they wished, or to ‘take shares away’ from other individuals or communities. “Is it fair,” asked Respondent G, “if someone buys quota for X millions, he cannot move it to wherever he wants to move? I don’t know.” His equivocation and hesitancy seem to indicate a struggle to reconcile conceptions of rights at various scales: here, the perceived rights of communities conflict with an understanding of individual freedom – leading to indecision and some confusion.

According to Respondent E, certain rules tying fishing rights to particular communities, or their inhabitants, would limit the freedom required by fishing companies to do their work effectively. Claiming that the waters around the Westfjords somehow ‘belong’ to the Westfjords does not make sense, he argued, and would hurt the overall profitability and performance of the industry. Fishing vessels, even if they are based in the Westfjords, need to be able to operate elsewhere:

“[If] we have bad weather conditions on the west coast, then we can move over, you know - to the East or the South. Sometimes the catches are poor in our areas and it can last for weeks... So for the total economy of Iceland I think that it is not... I think people aren’t seeing the big picture.”

For him, framing the issue in terms of the rights and interests of industry participants also reflects what should be the ultimate national priority: facilitating the continuation of a profitable and productive fishing industry. The appropriate scale at which to talk about ‘rights’, he indicated, is therefore one that looks at industry-wide performance rather than individual fishers or communities.

## **7.3 Individual rights**

### **7.3.1 The right to individual freedom**

Several respondents described the ITQ system as illegitimate or objectionable because they believe it violates certain rights belonging to individuals, particularly those perceived rights dealing with personal freedom. Individual Icelanders, argued Respondent A, should have the right to decide whether or not to go fishing. “It’s a really stupid rule,” he insisted, “that you can’t decide, like, ‘Oh, I want to go out on the sea and catch fish.’ No, you can’t. You can’t.” In his view, the ITQ system curtails an individual’s freedom to choose his own livelihood – not because it explicitly prevents certain individuals from purchasing quota, but because the allocation process and market have made it virtually impossible for many to afford it. Respondent F expressed a similar view in his description of how fisheries have changed since the implementation of the ITQ system. Privatization, he explained, has put limits on certain individual rights and freedoms enjoyed by Icelanders in the past:

“Everyone knows that as soon as you put the private ownership on fish and connect it with the boat, then suddenly the owner of the boat has a private – or a certain amount of fishery in the sea, you know, which me and you or anybody else cannot go and fish. Before, everyone could go and fish – but suddenly I could privatize parts of it. And you privatized it with the boats, which is bound to make a difference between people in the village.”

Several respondents framed the issue in terms of equal rights guaranteed by the Icelandic constitution. Icelandic law promises equal rights to all citizens, argued Respondent I: “You have to have equal rights for everyone, which is obviously not the fact in Iceland.” In his view, one element of those equal rights is the opportunity to do “whatever you choose to do as long as it’s not, you know, as long as it’s not going against the public welfare.” Although he acknowledged that the government must be able to limit total fishing effort in some way in

order to conserve stocks, he insisted that the right of equal opportunity must be protected. The fight for equal opportunity, he explained, will likely have to be won in the courts: “So the next step is to just go to the courts, and I would not be surprised if we would have to go abroad to finish this.” For him, the issue of fishing access deals with certain universal human rights – and the Icelandic controversy will likely have to be resolved by the international community.

### **7.3.2 The right to a ‘free market’**

One of the rights frequently identified by respondents was the right to participate in a so-called ‘free market. Given the fact that the theory of ITQ management is predicated on concepts including free market rationalization and efficiency (see Chapter 3), this is perhaps not surprising. What is striking, however, is that both opponents and supporters of Iceland’s ITQ system referred to the concept of a ‘free market’ as an ideal and necessary condition for legitimate fisheries management. As Ólafsson (2003) notes, in general, Icelanders tend to support market-friendly values such as competition, meritocracy and the benefits of increased freedom for business. The diverse conceptions of what a ‘free market’ looks like, however, varied widely – with some respondents describing the ITQ system as an example of a successful free market approach while others believe its major injustices stem from the fact that it does not constitute a free market at all. The term ‘free market’ thus takes on multiple forms and meanings, which shape the nature of debate in various contexts. Given this complexity – as well as the predominance of market approaches – Pálsson (1998) argues that social scientists must “attempt to examine what the rather loose reference to ‘markets’ entails,” (pp. 286) – exploring what they mean to those who live with them.

Most respondents who said that the ITQ system does not represent a ‘free market’ cited objections regarding the initial allocation process, in which the Icelandic government granted quota shares to vessel owners based on the best two years of a three-year catch history (see Section 3.2.5). Several respondents characterized this as a “gifting” to certain fortunate individuals of what soon became highly valuable commodities. Beyond the belief among some that this was morally objectionable given the perceived ‘common ownership’ of fishery resources (see Chapter 7), some respondents also stressed that this violated a sense of fairness because it afforded certain individuals and companies a permanent competitive advantage. As prices increased, individuals who initially received shares at no cost could make significant profits, while others who wished to attain quota were forced to purchase or lease them at great

cost (see Chapter 6). Eythórsson (1996b) referred to those vessel owners who received quota shares in 1984 or 1991 – along with those who acquired them when prices were still relatively low – as ‘winners’. The ‘losers’ are those fishers and crews forced to try and acquire quota via a system in which fishing rights devolve to the lowest bidder (pp. 281).

A free market system, argued several respondents, would be one in which individuals paid a ‘fair price’ for quota shares. For Respondent C, a ‘fair price’ implies a “harmony with the real value [of the product] ... and the productivity of the industry.” The “price should be in accordance with the value of the fish,” he argued, indicating a perception that as a result of speculation and inflation, the price of quota shares has grown far higher than the value of the fish to which they provide access. In the view of several respondents, this is made worse by the perception that fishing companies – along with individuals who control many shares - can rent or sell quota at “their own price” by manipulating the market:

“I think first and foremost,” argued Respondent G, “we have to reduce the lending price on the quota. We have to reduce that a company can lend the quota for their own price, whatever they put up, because they are controlling the price of the fish. They probably talk to each other, like the people that own the quota, like, ‘let’s raise the price on cod per kilo.’ And then all the people that own the quota – or those four or five companies – just raise it the same. So they can control everything. But it’s probably just how life is. Is it fair? I would say no. Unfair? No.”

His hesitant and somewhat ambiguous conclusion that ‘control’ over the price of quota is neither fair nor unfair reflects a certain degree of resignation. He perceives an element of injustice in the notion that quota holders can ‘control’ the price of quota and manipulate prices to their own advantage, but considers it a somewhat inevitable reality, echoing other respondents who voiced doubt that the ITQ system could ever be changed. The perceived ability of quota holders to dictate price led several respondents to characterize the ITQ system as a “monopoly”. Respondent C believes that term is appropriate because in addition to controlling the market value of quota, large companies that own a vertically integrated network of fishing vessels and processing plants can also purchase fish from themselves at a significant advantage. In his view, a ‘free market’ would be one in which everyone had an equal opportunity to purchase quota shares:

“80-90% of the fish that is landed doesn’t go on a public market... because they can buy from themselves and their own boats at a convenient price and pay a convenient salary to the seamen. And then they can – if they need to – they can lower the price of the finished product, if they need to, to get it to market... This market isn’t free at all. It’s a market of privilege.”

According to Copes and Pálsson (2000), the Icelandic government amended the legislation after 1998 in order to counter accusations of discrimination by issuing fishing licenses essentially on demand. Any new license holders still had to purchase or lease quota, however – often at prices approximately four times higher than the value of the catch it represented – leaving the structure of privileged access virtually intact (Copes and Pálsson, 2000).

Respondents also expressed a sense that the system violates free market principles because quota shares, although transferable, do not change hands fairly or openly. Respondent B argued that exchange takes place mostly between individuals and companies that already control quota, limiting participation to a small and increasingly closed group. The current system consists of “some big companies just negotiating between [themselves] in a dark room somewhere,” he explained. “So I think it’s not free – as free – as free competition should be... I think the way the system is functioning is that the quotas aren’t really for sale, you know – they change hands between good fellows.” Respondent I agreed, arguing that some fishing companies have made it difficult to tell who controls what, and likening the situation to conditions in the financial market leading up to 2008:

“And, you know, a few years ago – maybe two years ago, I’m not sure – I was looking at a few of the biggest fishing companies in Iceland and I think I came to 60 or 70% of the quota was still in the hands of these companies. And – but it was all under a new ID number – they had all changed. Almost all of them... Like what happened in the banking crisis. Exactly the same. So it’s the same people – the same people... You know, they changed the company – I think they changed it to a limited liability company a few years ago, so it’s not the same company – but it’s definitely the same people.”

According to several respondents, this lack of a ‘free market’ means that the ITQ system contradicts its purported main goal of economic efficiency. If the ITQ system originally

sought to ensure that the most efficient harvesters and processors remained in the market, consolidating power and capital among those fortunate enough to receive quota shares in 1984 appears to some to contradict that goal – potentially eliminating the likelihood that shares will actually end up in the hands of those who can use them most efficiently. “We don’t have, you know, normal playing rules in our biggest industry,” said Respondent I. “There’s nothing that suggests that the people who were fishing in 1982-83 [are] the best people [in] 2001-2011 to own all the fishing companies.” Vertical integration and skyrocketing quota prices have helped create a fixed body of participants and effectively prevent the entry of new fishers, he argued – in apparent contradiction of both economic and environmental goals.

## **7.4 Rights to participate in a democratic process**

Finally, respondents repeatedly made references to rights that they believe should be guaranteed by any true democratic society. Deliberations over processes like allocation – as well as broader questions regarding the form and meaning of ‘ownership’, they stressed, must be dealt with in a democratic process that recognizes, as Robards and Greenberg (2007) write, that “what states are desired or not, and who decides, is a question of equity and justice,” (pp. 22). Among respondents who objected to the ITQ system, many of their most pressing concerns related to perceptions that it violates their right to participate in the management process. Any legitimate system, several argued, must provide all stakeholders with a means to participate in discussions and decisions regarding how the resource is managed – echoing, once again, the theme of fate determination. “Those with more social, political or economic power,” note Clay and Olson (2008), “have more options in dealing with change,” (pp. 152) and thereby directing future development through adaptation.

### **7.4.1 The right to a more participatory legislative process**

Perceptions of ways in which the ITQ system has violated democratic processes took a variety of forms. Respondent I, for example, expressed frustration at the perception that initially, the legislation implementing the ITQ system was not passed following a period of debate and consensus, but was instead ushered quickly through the legislative process by the powerful fishing lobby. He objected to the perception that a small number of industry representatives could control the process to such an extent, exerting disproportionate influence over an issue that affected so many people. Now, when politicians call for patience and a slow, incremental approach to ITQ reform, he said, they sound disingenuous:

“On the 9<sup>th</sup> of December they put in a draft. And on the 20<sup>th</sup> of December, they had accepted a draft without any changes. We have now been arguing about this for thirty years. And we are not making any progress yet, and they say, ‘Oh, we have to do it slowly and gradually,’ and yada, yada, yada. It took eleven days. It was approved on the 20<sup>th</sup> of December.”

In the view of many respondents, the relative strength of the fishing industry has only increased in the decades since. Respondents C, B and I discussed at great length what they perceived as the power of lobbyists and large fishing companies to resist any substantive changes to the system, even if a majority of Icelandic citizens support such adjustments. In their view, the fact that quota holders control not only access to wealth but also to political influence makes it difficult for anyone without quota shares to push for change.

“In every party,” explained Respondent B, “there is someone who has been – what do you call it – ‘lobbied’ or something by someone. Then you get the voice to the congressmen and they – well, only a few of them are ready to do any changes... so no, I think the path for this is really, really difficult. It’s really just writing in the papers and getting public opinion with you.”

Even public opinion, he noted, seems to carry little weight: “Polls since the quota system [began] – at least for the last 20 years – have always shown that 70-80% of the people are against the system. But still it doesn’t change. It’s very strange.” Einarsson (2011) cited an opinion poll conducted by Market and Media Research in September 2010 indicating that 71% of respondents supported making changes to Iceland’s fisheries policy via a gradual reallocation of fishing rights. Contrary to democratic principles, argued Respondent G, public support for change has not resulted in significant political action because so many politicians depend on the support of wealthy quota holders. An editorial published in 2011 in *The Reykjavík Grapevine* echoed this perception, stating that the Federation of Icelandic Fishing Vessel Owners “is maybe the most powerful lobby group in the country. They have access to parliamentarians, trade unionists and local politicians who tremble before them. They are also very strong in the media. Two of the largest newspapers are on their side,” (Helgason, 2011).

This perception of political powerlessness among respondents reflects, in some ways, a reversal of an argument put forth by Christy (1996) that politicians would tend to keep fishing access open, since any move toward privatization would come at a high political price:

“They will only willingly make decisions to redistribute wealth when the costs of not doing so outweigh the benefits,” he wrote. “More important in the politicians’ calculations are the noises made by their constituents” (pp. 293). Although he referred to public opposition somewhat bizarrely and disdainfully as ‘noise’, Christy viewed it as a significant obstacle standing in the way of politicians instituting a form of privatized fisheries management. According to several respondents in this study, however, that scenario has been reversed in Iceland. The ITQ system has granted enough disproportionate influence to quota holders that public opposition has effectively been reduced to mere ‘noise’ – incapable of prompting politicians to restore access rights or alter the privatization regime. Respondent J referred to the difficulty of changing and adjusting the system as its most fundamental flaw, far more urgent than concerns regarding allocation or geographic consolidation:

“Questions about human rights or whether the system is fair or not – these are questions to be asked much later. They have nothing at all to do with the fundamental questions that we have to ask ourselves when we implement a fishery management system... [One of the] most important questions is, ‘how easy it is to abandon the system if it doesn’t work?’ And I would think the hardest system of all to abandon, once you have implemented it, is the ITQ system.”

Quota holders have become so powerful, argued Respondent B, that it prevents important and perhaps even necessary changes from being made: “this ‘perfect Icelandic system’ is so perfect that you can’t change anything – even if you think something is wrong, you can’t change it. And that’s actually how the system is flawed.” He described one instance in which this sense of political powerlessness became particularly clear. He recalled attending a national meeting of the Fishing Committee of the Independence Party (of which he is a member): “You had 100 people or so in that meeting. And almost everyone except maybe five people were quota holders... so you can’t really have any discussion about anything else than the status quo, or defending the system.” The ITQ system’s tendency to consolidate quota shares, he argued, ensures a political structure that limits substantive participation in management decisions to those who hold quota - gradually sidelining the voices of more and more people who consider themselves valid stakeholders, and further decreasing the chances of allowing room for change.

Such responses seem to contradict the early predictions of McCay and Acheson (1987), who believed that the ITQ system might be accepted by the Icelandic public because they respected the state as a just and democratic body: “Comanagement is a social reality in Iceland,” they wrote. “... Accordingly, the state is trusted in Iceland... if [the ITQ system] is accepted it will be partly because the state is trusted to be impartial in the assignment of quotas, a trust that enables the continuation of the ideology of equal, or equitable, access and the effective management of a limited good,” (pp. 33). Respondents’ descriptions suggest a very different perception of Icelandic democracy – at least as it relates to fisheries management. For these respondents, consolidation of political power linked to quota shares has resulted in a kind of disenfranchisement – limiting the ability of non-quota holders to participate in decisions regarding what they understand to be a public resource.

#### **7.4.2 The right to influence the country’s future**

In some cases, respondents linked frustration over their perceived inability to influence fisheries policy to frustrations regarding a perceived lack of constructive public discourse following the financial crisis. The period following 2008, they argued, represented a moment of opportunity to reconsider fundamental elements of Iceland’s priorities, political culture and governance structure, especially once a new political party came to power. As Benediktsson and Karlsdóttir wrote in 2011, “the Icelandic nation is engaged in extensive soul-searching. The current moment provides an opportunity to learn from the past and to design a more open and transparent society,” (pp. 234). Three years after the Crisis, Respondent I expressed a sense of disappointment: “We thought we would see some changes in Iceland after 2008, but apparently nothing changes.” Respondent F described the government’s efforts to bring citizens together to discuss a new Constitution, but questioned why they did not do more:

“They went around the country and assembled people together to talk about a new constitution... But why didn’t they do more of this? Why didn’t we – why didn’t they go on and settle us together in villages and talk about what kind of society we want? So we could work for it. There was a possibility in 2009 to do that – I think it’s gone, you know.”

The fact that respondents repeatedly brought up this issue of redefining national priorities indicates the degree to which fisheries management touches a range of much deeper concerns. Managing natural resources and deciding how best to allocate, control and use them, argued

Respondent I, are fundamental parts of determining Iceland's character, as well as the nation's priorities. Property rights regimes for natural resources like fisheries, argues Kennedy (2011), are not merely technical formulas, but a "historical record of winners, losers and social accommodation in economic and political struggles over a nation's direction" (pp. 20). Icelandic citizens must have the right to contribute to discussions regarding the nation's goals, argued Respondent F. Quota holders claim that profitability should be the end goal, he explained. "But what is the cost of profitability? You know, a depopulation of the countryside completely?... When you do these things, it always costs something." Respondent I agreed that all Icelanders should have the right to participate in fisheries management decisions, since those decisions influence the character and direction of a shared society:

"I want fisheries where people discuss how are we going to do this – villages, the boats, fish owners and the people working in the factory... They could come together in an open meeting and they discuss until they find how we are going to do this for the next year, instead of somebody owns this – this has to be done... These are things we have to, little by little, work towards... If every little village and district and things like that work in that democratic way, then there's hope."

## 8 Conclusion: Moving Forward

Respondents' discussions emphasize the fact that their perceptions of fisheries, fishing communities and the ITQ system reflect a vast and complex web of concepts and values. Respondents' discussions of 'rights' indicate significant complexity – and even uncertainty – regarding the intersection of perceived rights that can sometimes conflict at various scales. Several respondents, for example, struggled to reconcile instances in which perceived community rights to quota control contradicted perceived individual rights to freedom (see Chapter 7). Respondents' rather flexible conception of rights, however, may represent a reason for optimism. The fact that so many respondents conceived of 'rights' in terms of development and empowerment rather than strictly control of quota shares indicates a possibility for flexibility in policy solutions. As Copes and Pálsson (2000) acknowledge, the perceived right of citizens to equal treatment in the context of fisheries is important, but “the interests of society equally require conservation of a country's resource endowment and healthy economic performance,” (pp. 4). In this case, recognizing perceived rights to community control may not require sacrificing economic performance – or even the basic structure of the ITQ system itself, since most respondents did not stress that their understandings of rights hinge on specific allocations of quota, but rather on their ability to contribute to shaping the future.

The most significant theme appearing throughout their narratives – emphasized by those both with and without quota shares – was this perceived right to 'fate control'. On the individual, community and national levels, respondents stressed the value of an ability to influence the future. Their responses suggested that in the past, fisheries provided this ability: individuals could exert their independence and work towards a better future by fishing; communities could grow based on their access to productive fishing grounds; and Iceland itself could exert its national independence and sovereignty, exercising control over its own marine resources. According to respondents, the ITQ system's most significant effects impact their sense of fate control. Those with quota perceive a valued increase in their ability to make business decisions and plan for the future on the basis of guaranteed stability and access. Those without quota, on the other hand, perceive a corresponding decrease in their ability to determine the future of their communities, their own livelihoods, or the future of the country itself. Their discussions of the democratic process suggest a perception that the ITQ system has resulted in a kind of disenfranchisement, preventing individuals without quota shares from participating

in meaningful deliberations and decisions regarding the future of the resource and the rules that govern it.

This emphasis on the importance of ‘fate control’ echoes conclusions of the 2004 Arctic Human Development Report, which identified several aspects of human development currently underrepresented in Human Development Indicators with particular importance for Arctic communities:

“Most Arctic residents value fate control or the ability to determine their own destinies. Highly valued also is cultural continuity in the sense of nurturing traditional values and ways of life, even while embracing some of the obvious benefits of modernization. Close relationships with the natural world together with a sense of belonging to the land (and the sea) are important as well. Many of the Arctic’s residents would not want to exchange this way of life for the lifestyles of residents in southern metropolises, even though such a life may offer higher standards of living in material terms,” (Young and Einarsson, 17).

According to respondents, fisheries provide – or are associated with - each and every one of the values described by Young and Einarsson. Chapter Five established that for many respondents, fisheries represent an integral part of the way in which they understand their sense of place, heritage and identity – providing a sense of ‘cultural continuity’ that links individuals not only to their sense of the past, but also to their place in the present. Fisheries also provide a sense of belonging, ‘rooting’ inhabitants in fishing villages and tying them to fishing grounds and the resource itself through a combination of history, legend and personal attachment. Respondents value a sense of unique regional identity – stressing their repeated preference for the isolated villages of the Westfjords over Reykjavík. Finally, fisheries shape respondents’ conceptions of self-sufficiency and freedom – not only in a historical sense, but also in the way they perceive contemporary political struggles between rural regions and Reykjavík – and also in the way they imagine the future of their communities. Their responses suggest that much of respondents’ opposition to the ITQ system stems from the perception that ITQ policy has already – or could in the future – undermine their understandings of identity, place and heritage. Incorporating the perceived importance of a right to fate control into fisheries management reflects, as Einarsson (2011) suggests, a vision of human

development as a process of expanding choices: it “requires the freedom of people to make their choices and the presentation of opportunities to realize them,” (pp. 139).

The debate in Iceland over the fairness and effectiveness of the ITQ system has gone on for decades, and will likely continue for some time. Respondents made clear, however, that they do not think of Westfjords villages as doomed, and that the current perceived threats to community viability should not be understood as inevitable. Although respondents discussed a number of ITQ impacts – often associated with a sense of loss or uncertainty, they also emphasized throughout their narratives that inhabitants of fishing villages, even those who have long opposed the ITQ system, are not stuck looking backward, yearning only for a return to what the fisheries *used* to be. Their vision of the future entails adaptation and change, as well as an emphasis on economic diversification that transitions the region away from its historic dependence on fisheries in order to embrace new realms of opportunity. This reflects the notion that individuals in fishing communities may ultimately embrace change, even while objecting to the forces that caused it (Clay and Olson, 2008).

Several respondents stressed the need for economic diversification in the Westfjords, as well as the need to think beyond the struggle for quota shares. “It’s very important to try to adapt,” remarked Respondent A, “– to try to adapt so you can just move on, so you can have more opportunities in the future.” Respondent D argued that debates over quota allocation address only a short-term solution. The real problem, he said, is finding a method of sustainable rural development:

“I think we have to develop something that doesn’t fluctuate with the fishing quotas up and down. And I think that’s an issue the government has to address more – to look at the whole thing as a problem to be solved. You can’t solve it by just throwing a little bit of quota here and there. That’s just a – what do you call it – a Bandaid. It’s a short-term solution.”

He proposed a range of potential economic developments including the expansion of salmon farming and tourism. These could serve as potential pillars of a new regional economy, he argued – one that does not depend so completely on one resource. Respondent E suggested that rather than attempting to retain limited fishing rights in the Westfjords, the region should diversify by investing in research, development, and the continued modernization of the fishing industry:

“I think the policy our politicians are talking about is smaller boats – creating more jobs for more people to put bait on the hooks. And I really don’t want to see my people – my children – in such jobs. I would like to see them go to University and create different jobs in connection with the industry – more high-tech jobs based on the resources.”

The debate over ITQ management can sometimes seem to assume a binary choice between ‘maintaining’ fishing communities on the one hand, and facilitating a profitable fishing industry on the other. Respondents’ discussions of flexible, indirect rights allocating financial benefits and resources to communities make it clear that these two goals must not always be mutually exclusive. It is not control of ITQs themselves – but rather the ability to exercise control over the future – that matters.

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