

CASE STUDY BACKGROUNDER

Small Craft Harbours and Environment in the Gulf

- Small craft harbours (SCHs) involve several hundred docking facilities scattered around the coastal margins of the Gulf
- They offer anchors for rural communities, serve as hubs of the fishing industry and constitute a substantial stock of federally funded aquatic infrastructure
- The management structures for SCHs has evolved markedly over the past 30 years
- The advent of environmental management plans is a significant recent trend

This is a policy field that carries potentially profound environmental overtones for Gulf waters. Yet because of the modest scales of individual facilities and the dispersed character of harbour sites, the environmental effects are sometimes elusive.

This case study begins with a delineation of the policy sector in organizational, legal and policy terms. It continues with an identification of key decision choices and framing features that distinguish the small craft harbour field. The SCH policy community is identified next. Finally, the environmental dimension is established, with particular attention to the science foundation and the policy values that underpin it.

What is it that makes small craft harbours interesting from an environmental point of view? These facilities were built and rebuilt over several centuries in a variety of physical settings, and past operations bequeath 'legacy' attributes. Most SCH settings include diverse elements, including wharfs, breakwaters and launch facilities, as well as, 'upland' parts for servicing, parking, fuelling and storage. The federal Department of Fisheries and Oceans (DFO) is responsible for a national network of fishing harbours that provides this critical infrastructure. Several hundred SCHs are distributed around the Gulf and their cumulative significance is strong.

This policy sector extends to the environment as well, and it is important to explore multiple dimensions here. For example, wharfs and harbours are situated in the coastal margin, normally the most biologically productive zone of an inland sea. Second, since vessels gather in harbours, the potential for routine discharges during mooring, servicing, loading and unloading is magnified. Third, the construction and maintenance of harbour facilities - such as wharfs, breakwaters, staging areas and transit channels - necessarily involve environmental impacts. Fourth, harbour areas may become sinks for upstream pollution that originates away from the harbour site but can be disturbed and unleashed by harbour activities. In other words, harbour sites can be viewed as complicated small ecosystems that need to be monitored and managed.

In terms of public policy, the modern period for small craft harbours began with the *Fishery and Recreational Harbours Act* of 1978 and the associated Regulations. Records indicated several thousand facilities under DFO at the time, ranging from recreational docks and ramps to commercial harbours. Under statute, the minister is empowered to acquire, maintain, operate, repair and finance works at designated harbours. Members of Parliament from coastal constituencies found that local harbour needs formed one of the most active files in their work.

This legislative change took place at a time when Romeo LeBlanc served as Minister of Fisheries and Forestry. A native New Brunswicker, LeBlanc was well-acquainted with the challenges of the small boat commercial fishery and he made it his mission to champion this



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group. In place of the traditional public sector 'build and manage' approach, the question of community involvement began to be posed in new ways.

A signature trait of the SCH program was a new institution known as a harbour authority (HA). This was a local incorporated but normally non-profit group to which a harbour was leased for operational management. The goal here was to create a new intermediary body between the crown and the harbour users. Ownership of the facilities remained with the Government of Canada as the lessor but management was directed by volunteer HA personnel.

If the seeds of SCH management devolution were planted in the 1978 statute, the process took a new turn in the mid-1990s. The Chrétien Liberal government launched its famous program review, in which federal departments faced deep mandated budget cuts. This triggered a variety of schemes to downsize and offload existing programs. For DFO, the reduction of federal harbour expenses through 'divestiture' was one such program.

Divestiture is a complicated, multi-strand process. One part involves the screening of existing harbours for physical viability, so that those designated decrepit would be eliminated. Another part involved assessing intensity of use and those that no longer supported sufficient vessels would no longer be eligible for support. The SCH policy was sharpened further by several distinctions. A 'core' fishing harbour was defined as one supporting substantial commercial activity. A 'non-core' facility, by implication, fell below critical mass. And a 'recreational' harbor was one servicing sport fishers and recreational craft. Only the first category was guaranteed ongoing federal support while the others would be offered for sale to municipal governments and other interests. Thus, the eventual impact would be to concentrate on commercial fishery support while centralizing commercial services in fewer centres and exiting the recreational sector altogether.

How did the 'environmentalization' of the small craft harbour sector take place? Three distinct initiatives converge in the early 2000s to make this happen. The first of these is the strengthening of environmental assessment under the *Canadian Environmental Assessment Act*, and its spillover effects to SCHs. The second involves the policy initiative, within DFO, to build a formal environmental management component into harbour authority practice. And the third involves growing international recognition of the dynamics of harbour environments.

Reflections

In the Gulf of St. Lawrence, small craft harbours constitute a substantial policy sector. While it does not include all shore-based marine facilities (larger ports and private wharfs lie beyond it), the fishing harbour class is the largest. The SCH branch of DFO inherited the earlier government-sponsored and DPW-administered harbour program in the 1970s. Since then, the underlying values and rules have evolved markedly. This includes the establishment of harbour authorities in the 1980s and the divestment initiative in the 1990s. These policy shifts might be summed up as reorganization, rationalization and commercialization.

Two further qualities are worthy of note. While the harbour authority approach opened a door for community participation, it did so in a constrained way. The leasehold system meant that harbour authorities would be tenants rather than owners, with all the ambiguities that this entails. A number of organizational stresses have been noted – volunteer exhaustion and mounting levels of oversight and reporting among them. The SCH branch of Fisheries and Oceans serves as a champion within the bureaucracy but here too it combines mandates for promotion and oversight. In addition, the SCH program could not be sealed off from wider state policies which could impose additional burdens that the DFO funding base did not acknowledge.