



# the LAST LONGLINERS

LONG LINING IS LABOR INTENSIVE, BUT IT'S A SUSTAINABLE WAY OF FISHING, WITH LITTLE BY-CATCH. DESPITE THE DEPLETED POPULATION OF COD AND HADDOCK, THESE TWO CAPE COD FISHERMEN STILL CHOOSE TO USE LONG LINES WITH BAITED HOOKS TO MAKE A LIVING.

By Lisa Cavanaugh



Ninety miles offshore in the Gulf of Maine—in the dead of winter—can be a cold and lonely spot. But for longline fisherman Eric Hesse, it is the place he wants to be. “I like being on my own, out of sight of land, homing in on the cod.”

For generations, Cape Cod fishermen, such as Hesse, used long lines with baited hooks dropped to the ocean floor to catch an abundance of cod and haddock. But as he returns his vessel, Tenacious II, to its home port of Barnstable, he unloads only 1,200 pounds of low-value cusk. The cusk was hauled as part of a federal stock assessment survey trip that he captained for three days.

“I’m finding ways to repurpose my boat now,” he says, as he readies his gear for another upcoming research trip. “With the ways things are, I need to explore other industries that need infrastructure on the water.”

The way things are for the groundfish industry is undeniably grim. After decades of convoluted, and sometimes miscalculated, fisheries management, the Northeastern commercial groundfish fishery was formally declared a disaster by the U.S. Department of Commerce in 2012. Since then, commercial fishing quotas have been slashed by up to 70 percent, a disaster relief bill was passed, and most recently, the New England Fishery Management Council voted to request that the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration take emergency action to reduce “fishing mortality on Gulf of Maine Cod.” NOAA responded with extensive Gulf of Maine Cod and Haddock management measures, which severely restrict the amount of cod a commercial fisherman can catch in the area. Most of the cod and haddock we enjoy on Cape Cod is imported from Iceland or Norway.

“The sad thing is that there simply aren’t enough codfish left for longliners to target,” says John Pappalardo, CEO of the Cape Cod Commercial Fishermen’s Alliance. “The good news is that haddock have made a comeback. And longlining is one of the best ways to catch haddock while protecting cod because cod can be unhooked and released alive while targeting haddock.”

What this all means for a small hook boat fisherman is that his way of life is becoming harder to maintain. Long lining is a labor intensive, but sustainable way of fishing, with relatively little by-catch. “It isn’t the most efficient way to catch fish, which is why it is ultimately better for the marine environment,” says another veteran longliner Greg Walinski. “I can pull off the undersized fish and send them back swimming.

“Long lining does have a built-in conservation mechanism,” Hesse says, “which you can tweak to stay off one species or another.” He mentions a Norwegian study that showed that of any given 100 cod, hooks will catch maybe 40 of them—the other 60 will not be tempted by the bait and will swim by. Other kinds of gear types—gill and trawl nets—will catch many more of those same 100 hypothetical fish, because of the very nature of what a net does. vision of harnessing the collective power of small-scale, low-impact fishermen is why the Cape Cod Commercial Hook Fisherman’s Association (now the Cape Cod Commercial Fishermen’s Alliance) was first created in 1991.



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At that time, there were nearly 100 hook boats working on Cape Cod. The association worked to build a sector system to channel quota toward a small boat fishery and to give a political voice to these fishermen.

But now, Hesse and Walinski are among the last few long-liners left. "There might be a handful of guys who go out now and then," says Walinski. "But Eric and I are really the only two left here trying to make it work on a regular basis. And it's getting harder and harder. There just aren't any fish left."

The reasons for this are multifold. Hesse and Walinski count among them: overfishing of both the cod themselves and the bait fish (like herring) they feed on, inept fisheries management, ocean temperature change and increased acidification, a local seal population explosion and an unfortunate attitude about the sea.

"Guys say, 'We built the fishery,' but really that's Mother Nature," says Hesse. "Let's face it. We aren't going to catch the last cod on a hook. We need to rethink our approach to fisheries management, before it's too late."

Walinski wonders if that time has already come. He feels that fishing science has always been behind the curve. And the

thought process of fishermen has always been to catch whatever they can. He recalls old-timers telling him when he first started fishing that heading out for cod was "like going to the bank." Easy, abundant, lucrative and never-ending.

"That kind of attitude is what got us here," Walinski says. He believes that fishermen really need to be stewards of the ocean and protect the environment not just for their own sake to keep their fishing industry alive, but to safeguard the marine world around us. "It is beautiful to see the cod come up on the line. It's sad to think I may never see that again."

Neither Hesse nor Walinski come from fishing families. Hesse's love of fishing began in college, originally by crewing on a bluefin tuna harpoon boat and then ultimately getting his own hook boat in the early 1990s.

"I worked in Antarctica, traveled in Australia, built a house on Martha's Vineyard, but I knew I always wanted to come back here to fish," says Hesse. At first, using his degrees in physics and environmental engineering, he took a job with the Barnstable County Department of Health and Environment examining underground oil tanks for leaks that could harm the aquifer, and jigged for cod on the weekends. But eventually, he followed





his passion and turned to full-time fishing—tuna in summer, cod and haddock in winter—in 1994.

“I loved it,” says Hesse. “I could go out maybe 12 times a month in the winter. I would have time to spend with my wife and two young boys, but still make a good living. I liked that I could use my brain to figure out how to manage my business, how to find fish. And I was proud that the fish I brought in was of the highest quality.”

“A hook-caught cod is the freshest cod possible because with this gear type, it comes up alive and we put it on ice right away,” says Walinski. Like Hesse, Walinski came to ground fishing by way of tuna. As a teenager, he spent his summers with his girlfriend’s family on Cape Cod, discovered harpooning for bluefin, and never went home to his native Connecticut.

“I always loved being on the water, and it turned out to be my life,” says Walinski, who first started crewing on different types of boats. When Walinski purchased his own vessel in the mid-1980s, it made the most sense to set it up for long lining. It was less expensive to equip and the size of his boat would have made it tricky to outfit with gill nets. The environmental impact didn’t come into play back then, he admits, but very quickly into his fishing career, he realized that the decision to be a hook fisherman meant he had chosen the most sustainable method of fishing.

The higher quality of the hook fish became evident once fishing commerce went to a “display auction” setup, Hesse says. Then the buyers could see the firm, clear-eyed, well-handled line fish next to less-impressive dragger fish. The price went up and the hard work was rewarded. Certain retailers recognize



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the value in a sustainably caught fish. Both Hesse and Walinski have contracts with Whole Foods Market to sell their longline fish. The grocery chain is committed to selling fish that is caught in ways that will not cause harm to habitats or other wildlife. The fishermen know the market is there for high quality, hook-caught cod—if it can be found.

Both men have also turned to catching other species to continue fishing for a living. Dogfish is among the most abundant species in the waters off Cape Cod now, and they both fish for it, especially as its domestic market grows. Both also continue to harpoon bluefin in the summer months. They will try long lining

at least one more season. Neither really wants to imagine a life without fishing.

“I enjoy being on the water,” says Walinski. “I’m 57 and I can’t imagine working on land at this point. I’m a fisherman. A long-liner. It’s part of my identity.”

Hesse sighs when asked about a life without fishing. “I’ve considered getting out entirely. I always figured I could fall back on my master’s degree and do something with engineering for work.” But as he lifts heavy fish totes piled high with coiled and baited gear from his truck to his boat, he smiles. “I haven’t given up yet. Must be stubborn, I guess.” 🍷