

## Community Profile

### Belford, New Jersey

By Barbara Jones

*We are the children of our landscape; it dictates behavior and even thought in the measure to which we are responsive to it.*

Lawrence Durrell, *Justine*

### Background/History:

Belford is a small (about 1.32 square miles), relatively isolated, fishing community. It is nestled between Port Monmouth and Leonardo on Route 36 in the Bayshore area of Middletown, New Jersey. It sits across the bay from New York City such that the view from the fishing port is of New York City and the Earle Naval Pier. Belford is a mix of houses and small businesses, although the primary economic focus is the Belford Seafood Cooperative and the beach/fishing access areas. The community claims to be two-hundred years old with ties to the fishing industry that predate the Revolutionary War. Many of the fishermen in the area are part of a multi-generational fishing tradition. One Belford fishermen said he can trace his ancestry in the area to the 1600s, while others claim a connection to Belford of at least one hundred years. The community of Belford was originally called Shoal Harbor.



Figure 1. The view from Belford.

Belford is believed to have the oldest continually operating fishing cooperative on the east coast. It was founded in 1952. The cooperative is the heart of the port in that it includes the Pirate's Cove Restaurant and retail fish establishments, as well as a now defunct fish factory, a net house, the dock, and the boats. There is also a wholesale and retail lobster facility nearby called Shoal Harbor Lobster. The co-op is on Compton's Creek which runs directly into the Raritan Bay. A relatively new waste-water facility and a brand-new ferry terminal share the creek with the

fishermen.



Figure 2. The Belford Seafood Cooperative.

Two factors have contributed to Belford's relative isolation. The fact that the Garden State Parkway, the primary north/south access road along the New Jersey shore, swings away from the Raritan Bay coastline and, up until recently, the pollution of the Raritan Bay have kept the area relatively undeveloped. This anonymity will soon be a thing of the past since the ferry to New York City began operating on October 28, 2002 and the construction of 123 upscale condominiums is completed on the site of the old fish factory. According to one third-generation Belford fishermen, "No one knew we were here. We were left alone", while another fishermen, whose family has been fishing in Belford since 1896, said, "There will be changes...But how can it be better if it was fine before?"

Figure 3: Two different views of Route 36.



Belford is part of the Bayshore region of Monmouth County. The major access road is Route 36 that runs from Keyport to the Highlands. The Route 36 corridor is a "real mix" that according to the county planning office "needs improvement". There is an ongoing drive to revitalize the Bayshore area and Belford is part of that larger effort. The new Belford ferry to New York City and a new upscale condominium complex to be built by Hovnanian will bring a large influx of new people into the area. One man in Belford said he gets calls once a week from real estate agents asking if he would sell his house. This rise in popularity has many of the locals and the "old-timers" (retired fishermen) very concerned because houses that a few years ago were selling for \$80,000 are now selling for over \$200,000. The new condominiums are expected to start in

the \$300,000 range. Such high prices for condominiums will lead to even higher property values and higher taxes for the long-time local residents, yet the increased value of their homes does little for people “who don’t want to sell”. One fishermen said, “What does that mean to someone who is going to live here the rest of their life? It isn’t an asset to someone who is going to live here forever!” The associated rise in taxes is pushing many of the “old-timers” out of the area because, on a fixed income, they can’t afford to pay the higher taxes that are levied on their more valuable properties.

When it comes to these high real estate values, there is little sympathy for the plight of the Belford fishermen. Developers see Belford as just another part of New Jersey that shouldn’t be “immune to the high cost of living in [the state].” To them, the higher property values should be considered a benefit because the fishermen can get more equity out of their homes for their boats and equipment.

The township and the county have been making a major effort to improve the roads, bridges, and businesses in and around Belford. They claim these improvements are with fishing in mind, yet the commercial fishermen disagree. The Bayshore Development Office and the county planning office say they want to keep fishing in the Bayshore because “everyone wants fishing to stay part of the character of the area”. The notion of what fishing is varies tremendously in the Bayshore area. There are commercial fishermen like those in Belford and the Highlands and then there are recreational fishermen who fish throughout the region. When planners say fishing should stay a part of the area, it seems they are referring to recreational fishing rather than commercial fishing. The bait and tackle shops, the marinas, and the improved highways are oriented towards a more transient, less occupation based fishing population. The tension over bay access and possibly even the Belford port will involve resolving issues regarding recreational versus commercial use of the various fisheries.

Some of the proposed changes to Belford include the Spy House Harbor Project which is the Hovnanian housing project, a marina, a mixed retail shopping area, and the Bayshore Technology Center which could include a research and development facility, a center for fish farming, and a clam depuration plant. Interestingly, the initial Hovnanian plan of more, but smaller condominiums, was struck down by the county planners because, since the condominiums would be built on a waterfront site, “they needed to be better quality”. This could encourage conflict with the fishermen at the Belford Co-op because according to one member of the planning office, “[The Belford Co-op] is not the most beautiful piece of land”. There is concern that people moving into the area will complain about the site and the smell. One fishermen described Belford as a “working port”. It isn’t like “Mystic Seaport, all nice and clean.. They [new homeowners] are going to think it is an eyesore, and they are going to want to change everything” (Andrea Alexander, *Asbury Park Press*. October 13, 2002: A-17). People used to “like the smell of the fish”, but that could become a problem as new people move into the area.

According to a Monmouth County planner, “Fishing charm is one reason many people move to the area, but there’s a sewage plant and flooding occurs and, of course, these things occur”, but

that doesn't stop people from moving in.

He is optimistic that the people who chose to move to Belford will accept Belford as a fishing port, just as they must accept the flooding and the presence of a sewage plant.

A high level of gentrification could present significant problems for the fishermen who use Compton's Creek. Fishing boats leave in the winter at 2 a.m. and return around 5 p.m., while in the summer they go out around 11 p.m. and return by 5 in the morning. Equipment is left lying around, lobster traps are piled up, and nets are stretched across the ground after they've been cleaned. These behaviors are appropriate for a working port, but are not compatible with a community undergoing gentrification. This threat of change is particularly frustrating to the fishermen who have long ties to the area. For not only will gentrification change Belford such



Figure 4. The Belford Port

that “after a while it’s just another place”, but the construction of roads and new bridges was not to make things better for the local people, but rather for the commuters and the newcomers to the area. This frustrates local inhabitants because it suggests they did not need the improved road infrastructure, but the commuters will. These changes are making the fishermen feel very insecure about their future in Belford.

The insecurity stems in part from a loss of control over the fishing port. Many fishermen feel their right to ownership of parts of the port and their access to the creek are being seriously threatened. The feeling is the county is trying to buy or chase them out such that the Belford port will be a “thing of the past”. Where fishermen had to fight to stay in business because of regulations on the fishery, they now have to fight to stay in business to keep their heritage alive. Because undeveloped water front property is rare in Monmouth County, Belford’s lack of commercial water front development leaves a lot of highly demanded open space available for new construction. One fishermen said, “the county could come in and say we want this and this and we can’t pay for it, so they could take this place {the port and the cooperative} away”. The cooperative is the last place for the fishermen. It has everything and provides them with all the needed services: it is their hedge against the future and if they lose it, they lose their future as a commercial fishing place.

The 1950s and 60s were high times for Belford fishermen. They were left alone to fish and live in relative isolation. By the 1980s things were starting to change. They believed regulations on

the different fisheries were placing limits on their right to fish; enforcement agents were clamping down on them; and a tough, edgy reputation was taking root. The Belford tradition of rebellion and piracy was becoming a way of life. By the late 1990s and early into the 21<sup>st</sup> century many Belford fishermen were beginning to realize they needed to be more political, or as one warden said, “more aware of the need to play the game”. This attitude is evident today in that some of the fishermen are becoming what a conservation officer with New Jersey Fish and Wildlife Service (NJFWS) called “reasonable”. One fishermen who doesn’t mind public speaking and is willing to talk for the fishermen even attends some of the Marine Council Meetings. This willingness to take part in the system might help the fishermen as the level of gentrification and their vulnerability as commercial fishermen increases.

### **Belford defined Demographically:**

According to the 2000 Census there are 1,426 people living in Belford. Although Belford has a high population density, it is not incorporated. For census purposes, it is called a Census Designated Place (CDP). The Monmouth County office in charge of interpreting this census data said that Belford is defined by a few main streets. Most citizens of the area would be hard pressed to say exactly where Belford ends and Port Monmouth begins. The Spy House is supposed to be in Port Monmouth, yet the Spy House Harbor Project is part of the ongoing gentrification of Belford.

There are 706 males and 720 females that combine to form 464 total households. Of these 1,426 people, 39 were foreign born, 1,144 speak only English, and the most common ancestries are Italian, Irish, German, and Polish.

The following charts include data chosen from the 2000 Census. A lot of data was obviously not included because they did not necessarily contribute to an understanding of Belford as a fishing community.

Ethnicity	white	Hispanic	Other
	1384	115	23

Education	total over 25	high school diploma	Associate's Degree	Bachelor's Degree	Grad/prof Degree
Males	434	202	20	59	0
Females	442	172	43	54	31

<b>Employment</b>	over age 16	<b>Management</b>	<b>Sales/Office</b>	<b>Construction</b>	fishing/farming, and forestry
	744	202	254	122	17

The two most common income ranges in the 2000 Census were : \$60,000-74,999 with 106 total and \$75,000-99,999 with 90 total. The median income was \$42,000 for year-round employment and \$31,818 for total income. The mean income was \$34,283. The median house value was \$147, 800 and the mean value was \$155,481.

### **The Belford Port:**

There are about 20 to 30 boats that are associated with the Belford Seafood Cooperative, with about 40 boats in total regularly using the port. The cooperative has about 20 members and although there are several new fishermen who would like to join, the cooperative is not taking any new members. In the 1999 Environmental Assessment there were 32 core boats in the port. These boats were primarily in the 40-60 foot range. In 2000, the average boat length was 47.818 feet. There are no 80 foot boats in the Belford port. The absence of 80 foot boats is significant because, according to the fishermen, there is a feeling that they are being pushed out of the bay. They are being classified with the larger boats like those in Cape May that can fish outside the more protected bays. Belford doesn't have any really large boats, and, since many Belford fishermen fish for bunkers, their boats carry a lot of extra weight and can easily be swamped outside the bay.

The Belford fleet consists primarily of otter trawlers, gill netters, lobster boats, and purse seiners. Ethnographic data supported a boat count of 41. The 41 are listed below:

1. Phyllis
2. MacKenzie Paige
3. Eastern Welder-fluke, crabbing
4. Stephanie Vaughn
5. 3 Sons
6. New Johnson
7. Isaetta
8. Chele-C
9. Donna Lynn-dragger, crabbing
10. Al-N-Joy
11. Missy Moo (not really active)
12. Spisula
13. Maureen (not really active)
14. Amie
15. Sponge- crabbing, lobstering
16. Jenna & Taylor
17. Dutch Girl- very active, lobster, crabs
18. Diana Marie
19. Five Ikes- only pound boat left
20. Clam Boy
21. Rob Ann III
22. Linda
23. Margaret Ann
24. Dambot
25. It's A Snap
26. Bernadette
27. Richie N Julie
28. Bark I
29. Denise Marie
30. Sherri Lee
31. Trisha Marie
32. Sandy Hook II
33. Tiffany
34. Lobster Boy
35. Virginia Sue
36. Little Ike
37. Captain Seaweed
38. Halycon
39. Chelsie
40. Yebbie II

Figure 5. Some fishing boats at Belford



Of the boats in the cooperative, there are about 14-15 draggers, 12 lobster boats, and a variety of crabbing boats. Twenty-four boat names in the preceding boat list were generated by a mate as he stood on the boat cleaning fish. He named every boat, where they were docked, the status of the boat, and, in many cases, the captain of the boat. He knew the captains' local names, as well as their given names. This is important because such knowledge contributes to and defines the strength of the Belford fishing community.



Figure 6. The Seine House (the net house) in Belford.

The primary species at Belford are: Whiting, ling, squid, bluefish, butterfish, lobster, and crabs.

The fishermen are very interested in having a clam depuration plant built because they see that as a “transfusion in the arm”. The building of a depuration plant is a serious issue to the Belford fishermen because with one the port could attract a lot more boats and provide fishermen with a more year-round fish resource. It also would provide the co-op with much needed revenue. Presently, Belford fishermen can use the Highland plant, but because the Highland plant wants to limit capacity, they make it difficult for Belford fishermen to bring their clams there. According to several fishermen, a depuration plant could easily be built in the old seine house (net house) because it is a very well constructed building. They believe a depuration plant would not conflict with the Hovnanian housing complex either because there is a six or seven acre buffer between the old fish factory and the net house and a depuration plant does not emit any odors. The New Jersey Division of Fish and Wildlife is against building a depuration plant in Belford because of issues of regulation and water quality. The fishermen are hoping the plant will become a reality and based on ongoing plans for the region, the plant will probably be built.

### **Belford as a “traditional” inshore , diversified fishing community:**

Research done in the 1980s by Dr. Bonnie McCay described Belford as a “traditional” inshore, diversified fishing community. The numbers she reported in the 1980s have significantly declined from the 60 vessels and about 250 fishermen, but the criteria she identified as features of a “traditional” fishing community still remain largely true for Belford. Today there are about 35-40 vessels and significantly fewer fishermen. According to one fisherman there are only about two to three original families of about fifteen to twenty people who actively participate in the cooperative and others who use the port, but are not part of the cooperative. These new fishermen are not members of the cooperative and are not encouraged to join because their presence could change the dynamics of the port. The original families that started the cooperative are in for their lifetimes, but new fishermen could, if the industry took a downturn, decide to sell the cooperative and its holdings. If this occurred the “old fishermen would lose”.

The criteria McCay identified as features of a “traditional” fishing community in the 1980s and

remain largely true today include:

1.) the use of fishing gears and techniques that were of historical importance but are seldom used now elsewhere; specifically the use of pound-nets, fyke nets, eel pots, starfish mops, very small otter-trawls and beam-trawls. Sail dredging is illegal, but hand raking for clams is popular.

2.) A predominately “inshore” orientation: There are six big boats that go out about 100 miles, just as Dr. McCay reported in the 1980s. A lot of the fishing is done in the bay 6/10s of a mile from shore. The fishermen would prefer to be 3/10s of a mile from shore since that is where the bunkers are, but that conflicts with sport fishermen who, according to one commercial fishermen, “don’t have a clue what we are doing”.

3.) A high degree of diversity and change in types of fishing: Just about everyone reported a high degree of flexibility within the fishery. There is very little specialization. For example, when asked about the number of clambers in Belford, the answer was “no one clams exclusively”. According to the Niles Stolpe with the Garden State Seafood Association, Belford fishermen operate as a “traditional” Mid-Atlantic mixed trawl fishery. They adjust their fishing and marketing to the annual migrations of the silver and red hake, fluke, flounder, sea bass, and porgies.

4.) Persistence of owner-operator pattern: This appears to be true today. Not only do the fishermen captain their own vessels, but some even built their own boats. The boat captains not only fish, but they appear to have a highly vested interest in the fishing port and their boats, as well.

5.) A very high degree of kin relatedness among the fishermen who use the port: This is not as true as it once was. Many of the fishermen who use the port are new fishermen. There are only two or three multi-generational fishermen families who still work out of the port, yet these families are very connected. One fisherman, when he fishes outside the bay, fishes near his two brothers. They might be one hundred miles off shore, but their boats are within four to five miles of each other. Family is important such that there is a strong tie to Belford. Seeing your family every day is important and so staying in or near Belford is important. Many fishermen told me how “[they] love Belford” and wouldn’t live anywhere else. The 1999 Environmental Assessment determined that Belford “remains a family based fish port”.

6.) Age and fishing experience patterns of a “family fishery”: This is certainly still true today. Fishermen start fishing as young children, some have their own boats by eleven, and start running a “big boat” by sixteen or seventeen. One fisherman owned a 60 foot boat at 21 years of age.

### **The Community of Belford:**

The fishing port is the highlight of Belford. It is easily reached from Route 36. There is one small sign on Route 36 indicating the Belford Seafood Co-op is “this way”. Just a few years ago, one of the main access roads, Church Street, was dirt and you would not have wanted to drive down Port Monmouth Road, but now it “looks like Hollywood” ( Elaine Van DeVelde, *The Hub*.

7/19/2000). The changes have brought a lot of new faces to Belford. The waitress at The Pirate's Cove Restaurant (the restaurant associated with the cooperative) didn't even know the restaurant/co-op existed one year ago. She is from the area, but she has "no idea how people find out about this place". The people come to the cooperative to buy fish and many stay to eat. They also come to see the boats. One group came into the restaurant and specifically asked "to sit on this side [of the restaurant] because you can see them [the boats]".

The new faces have contributed to a lot of changes in the port. In the 1950s and 60s, the fishermen knew all the policemen and could request a "Belford Boy" to solve a crime or break up a fight. Now the fishermen don't know who the policemen are. They used to be local boys, but now they are from outside Belford. Police salaries are one explanation for the change. Police earned \$100 a week in the 1960s, whereas today they earn \$65,000 per year. The higher salaries brought new people into the area who then got on the town council, and, according to some fishermen, then changed things.

The Interpilot Agency is part of the Belford port. The agency helps direct large ships through the New York Harbor. One of the pilots is an ex-fisherman. In the agency office there is a picture of a boat that went down during a storm. That is the only place with any memorials or physical reminders of people from the community lost at sea. There are no monuments to the Belford fishermen. In the port area, there is no tangible evidence of sentiment or emotion regarding fishing or fishermen.

The Meadow View Inn was the hotel for the captains, mates, and owners. They would stay at the hotel and drink and eat in the bar/restaurant, but now the hotel has a new owner ( he has owned it for 36 years) and no one stays there anymore. Fishermen still use the bar, but the bar scene isn't what it used to be. The commercial fishermen account for about 25% of the bar business, but they are loyal customers. Over the past 36 years the owner has seen the sons, and now the grandsons support his business. According to one "Belford Boy", Belford used to be (and to some still is) a "tough area". The toughness came from the high number of fishermen (there were 40 boats with 80-90 fishermen) who started drinking at 9a.m. when they got back to port. They would stay at the bar and drink all day long. Today, many of the fishermen "don't want to hang around after fishing, they want to get back home".



Figure 7. Meadow View Inn

Part of the Belford area is the Route 36 corridor that includes Port Monmouth and Leonardo. On Route 36 there are several bait and tackle shops, seafood restaurants, and marinas. There are plenty of places to buy bait, ice, and food, but that makes sense because “recreational fishing is big business”. There are fishing tournaments held regularly to support the recreational fishing industry. All this supports the notion that recreational fishing is important to the area. The construction of a depuration plant in the Highlands is perceived as evidence of support for commercial fishing in that the state would not have built the plant if a “significant investment” couldn’t be made.

### **Community Traditions:**

Belford fishermen were raised on the notion that the ocean was full of fish, so they taught their kids that it “was a richly rewarding, social thing to do...When growing up fishing had a lure, now you’re raping the ocean”. Today’s fishermen were raised on the docks. They were paid a few dollars to help on the boats and from that lifestyle became very knowledgeable about the fishery and the port. The “old timers” taught many of today’s fishermen and to this day “hang out” at the port. When the fishing boats come in the old timers are there to watch. They get “real excited” when the fish come in: “Once we got 6,000 pounds of croakers and the old timers never saw those and they got all excited about them”. This love for fishing has been echoed by many fishermen: “I would stay in fishing until I can’t walk no more”; “I haven’t done a days work in my life”; or “there is nothing better than getting a big tow of fish” are just some of the sentiments expressed by fishermen in Belford. They pass this heritage down to their children, such that those families still fishing in Belford have been doing it for several generations. The founding families of the cooperative still fish and still control the cooperative. The boat, the Five Ikes, is named for the five sons of one fishing family. All five of the sons fish, as do the grandsons.

Many of the fishermen have local names. These names bind the fishing families to the fishing community and contribute to a sense of insularity towards outsiders. Anyone with long ties to the port knows who Captain Grumpy or Bologna Pete are and they know the stories surrounding the names. Local names tie the community together, just as living in the Belford area does. The fishermen rely on a series of behaviors that tend to keep “outsiders out”. Frequently, the expression, “throw’em in the crik” is said in regard to men in suits ( a slightly veiled reference to government employees) or outsiders who interfere in their lives. By threatening to throw outsiders in the creek, the fishermen feel more in control of the port. Because everyone used to be from “the area” (police, government employees, etc.), everyone knew one another and trusted one another. They “work[ed], play[ed], and [fought] together”. This heritage of living and fishing together in a community has created a rather unique place in Belford. This uniqueness is something the fishermen are trying to keep in tact. Many fishermen say there should be some way to protect their home and port from all the changes. Belford has a good well-protected port that supports a little fishing community and “they’re [the county and township] changing all that... Belford is a sleeping giant down here and they want to move and destroy the giant”.

Among the many changes for Belford fishermen is the availability of crews. There used to be

plenty of local people available for hire, but now there aren't. Because there are less fishermen the demand for crews is lower. When local people do look for jobs, the fishermen don't necessarily have any so the people go somewhere else to find work. This is part of a dangerous cycle for the fishermen because when they need help there aren't people available to hire. The clambers go out by themselves and can get hurt. It is very dangerous to fish alone.

Another change is the commercial fishermen's access to the bay. The bay has been the source of fish for many of the Belford fishermen. They would travel out about 3/10s of a mile for bunkers, but now the recreational fishermen don't want the commercial fishermen in that part of the bay. The commercial fishermen go out about 6/10s of a mile to avoid conflict with the recreational fishermen, but they still have trouble. The recreational/sports fishermen tamper with their nets (cutting them or running right through them) to get the bunkers out. The commercial fishermen don't think too highly of the recreational/sports fishermen. Commercial fishing don't do much "pole fishing" and see fishing as a way to provide fish to the public for them to enjoy. They believe the recreational fishermen don't really understand what they are doing. The following incident describes the perceived level of ignorance and competition that exists between the recreational and commercial fishermen: "We [commercial fishermen] were out cleaning up the bay for the DEP. We strung nets between two commercial boats for the trash. Some sports fishermen saw us and called the Coast Guard to say we were stripping the bay of fish". Stories such as this one only increase the distance between commercial and recreational fishermen. The absence of any recreational fishing in Belford specifically makes this competition between commercial and recreational fishing very awkward to define. The competition is premised on the commercial fisherman's belief that he is providing a much needed public service- obtaining food for a hungry public, and the belief that the recreational fisherman sees commercial fishing as an encroachment on his fishing turf. This attitude towards recreational fishing is exacerbated by the feeling that community improvements and development dollars are going to change Belford into something more compatible with recreational fishing than commercial fishing.

A new tradition in Belford is a willingness to participate in the political process and to accept change. Younger fishermen are participating in the political process because they realize that in order to control the changes in their lives they need to be a part of the decision making process. Accepting change is also new to Belford. The Belford legacy is rich with examples of rebellion and insularity. The new ferry to New York City was a true test of Belford's ability and willingness to accept and adapt to change. Prior to October 28, 2002, the attitude at the dock was one of anger and frustration over the presence of the ferry. Everything from the size of the boat, to the speed of the boat, to the ferry's time table provoked complaints and irritation from the fishermen. The complaints were not limited to verbal bashing, but including some very proactive efforts to rid the creek of the ferry. As a service to the community, the ferry company, prior to opening day, took the local people on a free ride. One fishermen who went complained about the ferry captain's ability to navigate the boat. After October 28<sup>th</sup>, the attitude was very different. The ferry did not interfere with the fishermen's ability to earn a living and, by its presence, the port would get some much needed new bulkheads. This willingness to adapt and accept such a major change reflects well on the community's ability to withstand the pressures associated with gentrification.

### **The Belford Fishery (needs work):**

The total landed value for Belford in 1992 was about \$9.2 million. According to the 1999 Draft Environmental Assessment on the Mid-Atlantic Region, ocean quahog vessels dominated the port of Belford. In 1992, 32% of the landed fish value was attributed to ocean quahogs. Excluding ocean quahogs from that data, the most valuable species was lobster representing 46% of landed value, with blue crab, summer flounder, menhaden, silver hake, and *Loligo* squid following. Again excluding ocean quahogs from the data, butterfish yielded 0.90% and mackerel 0.46% of the 1992 landed value.

The otter trawls contributed 19% of the total landed value; if ocean quahog dredges were not included, this value would be much higher. The species contribution of otter trawl catches varies seasonally and over the years. In 1992 it was dominated by summer flounder (26%), silver hake (22.5%), *Loligo* squid (14%), winter flounder (11%), and scup (9.3%). Ethnographic data for 2002 suggests a different species mix.

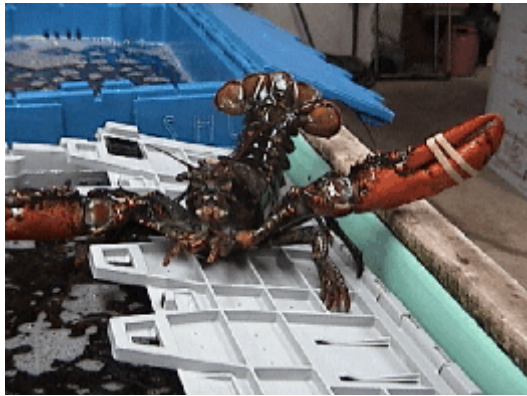


Figure 8. Lobster at Shoal Harbor Lobster

There have been tremendous fluctuations in the number and types of fish landed at Belford. In 1994, ocean quahogs represented about 60% of the total pounds landed, while in 2000 they represented only about 0.01%. Dogfish which were at zero in 1994, represented 38% of the total fish landed in 2000. Shellfish, squid, fluke, and tile fish remained relatively consistent in terms of total pounds landed through the years 1994-2000.

**Table 1: BELFORD, NJ: Landings by Year;**  
 Source: NMFS landng data, 2001

<b>Year</b>	<b>Millions of pounds</b>	<b>Millions of dollars</b>
<b>2000</b>	<b>3.8</b>	<b>2.6</b>
<b>1999</b>	<b>6.3</b>	<b>3.0</b>
<b>1998</b>	<b>7.7</b>	<b>2.9</b>
<b>1997</b>	<b>9.7</b>	<b>2.5</b>
<b>1996</b>	<b>11.9</b>	<b>2.9</b>
<b>1995</b>	<b>13.6</b>	<b>4.5</b>
<b>1994</b>	<b>18.3</b>	<b>6.9</b>
<b>1993</b>	<b>19.9</b>	<b>6.5</b>
<b>1992</b>	<b>18.5</b>	<b>5.0</b>
<b>1991</b>	<b>7.8</b>	<b>3.4</b>
<b>1990</b>	<b>8.2</b>	<b>3.1</b>

**Management Impacts:**

Interestingly, most Belford fishermen agree that the fish needed to be regulated, that the regulations have clearly contributed to the high numbers of fish they are now seeing. According to several fishermen there are “lots of fish out there” and that fishing “will get real good, if the government opens up regulations”. The problem today isn’t necessarily the numbers of fish in the sea, but rather the cultural traditions on shore. Some fishermen claim that the government

should be more “considerate of the cultural part” in that there has always been a steady battle to stay in business, but “before it was [about] the number of fish and now it is the issue of the land”. One ex-fisherman said the government should buy the fishermen’s boats and make an effort to retrain them. He believes that fishermen are feeling very insecure about what is slowly happening to them and that “retraining would ease their pain and stress”. If the economic development intended for the area does occur, retraining might become an option for the Belford fishermen. It would be interesting to see how eager they are to be “retrained”.

Although the “issue of the land” is important, regulations play a significant role in the success of the fishing port. Many fishermen have been forced to sell their boats and equipment because fishing has become too expensive. There isn’t enough money in one boat to support two families, so sharing equipment and a boat is not an option either. To maintain the nets and equipment for a pound fishing boat can cost \$10,000 or more and it takes six weeks of fishing to get paid. The high cost and the highly regulated nature of the fishery severely limit the number of boats. The high fines have exacerbated the situation for many fishermen. In the “old days” fines were about \$100, you paid them, and then “went about your business”. Today the federal fines can run \$30,000 to \$40,000, with state fines about \$3,000. One fisherman claims he paid a fine of \$33,000 for keeping illegal size lobsters.

The highly regulated nature of the fishery followed years of over fishing and a rather cavalier attitude toward the sea. There were so many lobster that selling “shorts” was common place. Through the late 1970s, lobsters were in great abundance. There were so many lobsters that the fishermen sold them for \$2 a piece, “just to get rid of them”. Some fishermen admit they took too many lobster and they did over fish. They are pleased to see an increase in the number of fish, but they still think the industry is over regulated. The regulations and the inflexibility of the regulators aggravate many fishermen. One example a fisherman relayed to me demonstrates just how destructive an inflexible regulatory policy can be: “They [the ACOE] were dredging so that larger ships could be brought into the harbor. The clambers asked to be given a few more days to get the clams out, but they weren’t allowed the extra time, so the clams got sucked into the dredge”. Not only did no one benefit from that decision, but it added to the animosity that already existed between “the men in suits” and the working fishermen. Over the years, the Belford fishermen have resorted to all sorts of criminal mischief in order to “do things the way they have always done them”. They have evolved very creative ways to evade enforcement. According to a NJFWS warden, the fishermen have placed spotters to warn other fishermen; they have put hidden compartments in their boats to hide illegal lobsters; they have left the lobsters out in the water and then sent a “non-lobster boat” out to get the lobsters; and they have listened to the warden’s radio to know where he is and when he is coming. Those who enforce the regulations in Belford believe the fishermen enjoy the “challenge of outwitting the law enforcement agents”.

Belford, because it is such a close-knit community, is difficult to observe. Enforcement agents have a hard time getting close to the fishermen because so many of the surrounding land is owned by the fishermen. Enforcing the regulations can be very difficult. One time when a few agents were hiding in some *Phragmites* trying to observe, the fishermen poured gasoline on the *Phragmites* and set fire to them to get rid of the agents.

The depuration plant is another issue that has the wardens and the fishermen in opposition. The fishermen want the plant in order to utilize a contaminated resource, to expand the number of boats using the port, and to bring in more revenue. The enforcement agents are against the depuration plant because it would stretch their already strained human resources and, by making it easier for people to be out in the water, it would add another layer of camouflage. When there are only a few boats on the water, an outsider sticks out, but if there are many boats, it is easier to hide thus providing another opportunity for Belford fishermen to evade the law.

Although many fishermen in Belford are happy with the number of fish they are now catching, there is still a tremendous amount of anger over how the government has handled the fishery. One fishermen went so far as to say:

The government killed the fishermen. They murdered them. Making clammers go out in bad weather can lead to their deaths, so by setting certain days when you can fish is very dangerous because if you can only fish on Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday, there is a gale blowing, you must go out during those days regardless of the weather.

Another fisherman said “a few more laws and you might as well burn the boats”. The fact that the fishermen are driven so far out of the bay to get fish ( although one planner said in response to that, “it’s a big bay out there”) and the extremely high fines are two issues that forced at least one fishermen to sell his boat. Another fisherman claimed he sold his boat because the laws were putting him out of business.

Although regulations have been blamed on the loss to the industry of both fishermen and boats, the efforts to regulate the industry have been crucial to the long-term use of the fishery resource. According to a warden with NJFWS, Belford fishermen have historically been shortsighted in their use of the different fisheries. Their goal has been to maximize their income to pay bills and to “feed their children today”, but not to worry about the condition of the resource ten years from now. One time Belford fishermen used dragger nets in Raritan Bay so intensively they literally wiped out the fluke in the bay.

Belford fishermen are particularly difficult to regulate because of the very close-knit nature of the community. Unlike Point Pleasant or other ports in New Jersey, the Belford port is very organized. The organization comes from the closely related nature of the fishermen who use the port. One warden said, “they figuratively are in bed with each other”. Although they don’t really trust each other, the warden believes they all watch out for each other. When the warden stopped for a coffee in Hazlet, the fishermen in Belford knew. They know what vehicle he drives, they know what clothing he is wearing, and they know most of the methods he has to “catch them doing something they shouldn’t be doing”.

Although Belford “has always had an edge to it”, in that the fishermen have a traditional way of doing things and they believe that fisheries managers “don’t know what they are doing”, the fishermen are likeable because they “stand for something”. They rely on what they have been taught as members of fishing families and these beliefs are passed to their children. These beliefs

include a feeling that what they are doing is right and because of that who can tell them how to do it any better: “Watch out for the man [the warden]”; “screw the game warden”; “the government doesn’t know anything”; and “it is okay to do anything you can to protect your way of life” are just some of the comments heard by a New Jersey enforcement agent. He believes that because they do “stand for something”, they protect their way of doings things very well and can be quite “formidable”. According to the fishermen and the wardens, they both want the same thing: sensible regulations and enforceable regulations. If those making the management decisions for the marine fisheries could make such regulations, Belford might not continue to be so formidable in their pursuit of the Belford way of life.

### **The Future of Belford as a Commercial Fishing Place:**

Belford fishermen see Belford as a fishing port, so they don’t encourage sport fishermen. That is an interesting distinction, but an important one. For while the Monmouth County planning office thinks the Bayshore is a fishing community, it is because of recreational fishing and the fact that recreational fishing is big business. There is little discussion there about Belford as a commercial fishing port, but rather the potential for a new style Belford. A marina would benefit sport or recreational fishermen, but it wouldn’t necessarily benefit commercial fishermen. The new condominiums and the retail businesses will bring new people into the area, but the question is will those people support the commercial fishery or will they add to the competition already felt by commercial fishermen working in the bay. The Bayshore Economic Development Office has plans for Belford, too. These plans include a high-tech fishing center. Such a center would provide commercial fishermen with year-round employment and more economic opportunities, but it would change their orientation from the sea to the land. They would become fish farmers instead of fish boat captains.

Interestingly, the lack of agents available to enforce regulations reinforces the perception that commercial fishing is under appreciated. Honest fishermen feel betrayed by the system because if they report illegal activity it can take a long time before an agent can respond to the incident, while dishonest fishermen can exploit the resource and encourage over fishing. Given the value of the commercial fishing resource, conservation officers are “dismayed” by the lack of human and financial support. The feeling is that what conservation officers do is not important, yet the value of the landings at Belford alone was \$2.6 million in 2000.

There is a lot of optimism that Belford will persist as a commercial fishing port. Belford fishermen are pleased with the numbers of fish they are catching and excited about the possibility of a depuration plant being built in the net house. There is fear, though, that the Belford way of life is in jeopardy, that the tradition of a family fishing port will disappear when more and more new people move to Belford. The ferry is also seen as a threat because its existence challenges the monopoly the fishermen have had over Compton’s Creek. The ferry provides another challenge to their way of life in that it shares their water and adds a large number of people to a community that has prided itself on its disregard for outsiders. Yet, the successful integration of the new ferry into Compton’s Creek indicates the willingness of the fishermen to adapt to changes. Belford as a fishing community, where the wives of fishermen have a warm dinner ready when their fishing spouse comes in at 11 PM and where everyone

knows one another probably will not last. Whether the fishermen can persist in a new type of Belford is important because even though the fishermen love Belford, if they leave those things that made Belford unlike other places will be lost.

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