

# IS FISHING DYING IN SHEEPSHEAD?

BY JOE FILIPPAZZO

"I think I just got screwed out of some money," Bobby Fish said as he thumbed through the crumpled ball of fives and tens in his calloused, grease-stained hand. As second mate on the Sea Wolf, a dilapidated party boat that operates out of Sheepshead Bay, he and his first mate Kenny agreed that the commercial fishing industry here has seen better days.

The trouble for fishing boats began back in the 1930s, when business was booming. After decades of over-fishing, which has brought several species to the brink of extinction, the federal government passed the Magnuson Fishery Conservation and Management Act in 1976, which is ratified annually by Congress. Its goal was to end over-fishing and rebuild fish stocks by imposing stricter regulations.

"They put these insane, asinine laws in place," said Fish, "and they make it impossible."

What used to be a bustling dock, that over 50 ships called port, has been reduced to fewer than a dozen commercial boats in Sheepshead Bay - a downward trend fueled by strict federal fishing regulations and skyrocketing overhead. While few dispute that the party boat industry is slowly sinking, conservation groups and commercial fishers disagree over who's to blame and how to resolve the problem.

Fishing professionals believe their struggle is due to uncompromising environmentalism that has done its job but is no longer necessary. "It's definitely a success story," said Captain Paul Risi, owner of the

Tradewinds Fishing Fleet and ad hoc representative of the region's concerned fishers, "but they've turned the intent of the law 180 degrees." Risi said that fishing in the early 90s was terrible and severe catch restrictions have brought the fish back to safe levels but the "green lobby" has too much influence in Washington and refuses to let the industry recover.

"The environmental groups can show you a guy in Norway batting a seal on the head and then they pass laws here that hurt the fishermen," said Risi who believes that the data must be wrong as the water is teeming with fish. He proposed the government put observers on party boats to see how much fish is actually being thrown back. "They all want to say 'We saved fishing' but no one wants to say 'We took your fish away,'" he said. Risi admitted that he would get out of the business if he could but no one wants to put into a dying commercial fishing industry with an unsympathetic bureaucracy as a boss.

Lee Crocket, the federal fisheries policy director of the Pew Environmental Group said that the science isn't perfect, but it's accurate enough to know that over-fishing is still a problem and strict regulations - even at the expense of the commercial fishing industry - are the only way the populations will recover. "The economic consequences are real but it's shortsighted to undercut conservation efforts," said Crocket, who proposes the government hire the struggling fishers to more accurately gather data until the industry recovers.

Government regulations on fish totals are only part of the problem. A more ambiguous yet equally grave

threat to the industry is gentrification in booming Sheepshead Bay. A 2003 study by the Pew Oceans Commission found that along the Atlantic coast - from Maine all the way down to the Gulf of Mexico - "commercial fishing businesses are losing access to industrial waterfronts at an irreversible rate due to a number of factors including coastal development."

The fishing industry certainly isn't going to get much help from local officials either. Sheepshead Bay is under the jurisdiction of a community board steeped in zoning concerns to begin with. Frequent resident complaints coupled with several incidents involving the police at the pier on Emmons Avenue have made officials relatively unsympathetic to the fishers' situation.

"Residents have been very verbal against these boats," said Theresa Scavo, chairwoman of Brooklyn Community Board 15. Many of the party boats are just summer season booze cruises that result in drunk and unruly crowds, she said, and the party boats have been "nothing but a nuisance" as they litter and disturb the neighborhood.

The commercial fishers insist they are well behaved and have reasonable business needs. "We're making too much noise?" Bobby Fish asked an irate Emmons Avenue resident recently. "Then why would you buy the apartment next to the dock?" he quipped.

But the few who remain in Sheepshead Bay don't believe they can survive the government's restrictions and the area's makeover. When wealthier people move to the shores, resident complaints restrict party boat operations and increase property value from gentrification puts even more stress on an already struggling industry. As Bobby Fish expressed it, a widening class divide creates a situation where the poor don't have the time or money to fish and the rich just use their own boats.

When he finished hosing down the Sea Wolf, Bobby Fish shook his head and said, "It's not like it was. You're hearing the death rattle." Then he lit his cigarette and stepped off the boat.



Mike Dunn/Brooklyn View  
An aerial view of Sheepshead Bay

## ACCIDENT VICTIMS

### KNOW YOUR RIGHTS!

### Get Baron Associates P.C.!

## ALL ACCIDENTS & INJURIES



- Auto - Bus - Train & Bike
- Wrongful Death
- Pedestrian Knockdowns
- Construction Accidents
- Defective Products
- Elevator Accidents
- Ceiling Collapses
- Slip & Fall / Sidewalks & Buildings

**FREE CONSULTATION**

**HOME &  
HOSPITAL  
VISITS  
AVAILABLE**

## Baron Associates P.C.

2509 Avenue U,  
Brooklyn, NY 11229

**718-934-6501**

[www.baronassoc.com](http://www.baronassoc.com)

*We Speak Russian and Spanish*