Neil Caudle

Tradition and Change In A Coastal Fishing Village

One evening in September 1933, Irvin Guthrie walked out of his house and felt water rising around his ankles. A huge storm, one of those nameless but historic hurricanes, was shoving back water up in Back Sound, flooding Harkers Island.

"Up in the road, somebody had a lamp lit," Guthrie recalls. "People were tying themselves together with a long rope so nobody would be lost. They were heading for higher ground."

The swollen sound had split the land barrier and carved a new inlet between Cape Lookout and Shackleford Banks. The inlet released the flood waters and spared Harkers Island. The islanders untied themselves and went home. The hurricane had swept Guthrie's house off its foundation, but set it down whole. His neighbors helped him lift it back astride its underpinnings.

"Only thing is, the doors and windows never fit just right after that," Guthrie says. "Things just don't hold a straight line."

For Guthrie, that September night marked a turning point in the life of Harkers Island. It was, he says, almost as if when the water rushed out, the twentieth century rushed in. The inlet made it easy for sports-fishermen and tourists to use the island as a jumping-off place, and brought about more change, Guthrie believes, than the bridge to the island which was built in 1941.

"When I was born here in nineteen-o-one, there were less than a hundred people living here," he says. "And everybody at the time made a living out of salt water."

Today the population of Harkers Island is 1651, and the old fishing and boat-building traditions are in trouble. Says Jim Sabella, an anthropologist at the University of North Carolina at Wilmington: "If you go to Harkers Island with the notion that you're going to find this quaint, old-timey fishing village, forget it. It's just not there. It's only when you've lived there for a while, and you get to know the families, that you see the older way of life coming through."

It is a way of life that lures young people home from the cities and attracts outsiders into rustic retirements spent among boats, nets, and porch swings.

Sabella and his research associate, Marcus Hepburn, have just completed a two-year Sea Grant study of the island. They wanted to be able to tell the agencies regulating the state's fisheries something about the people they are regulating -- their values, their history, and their culture. But Sabella and Hepburn also wanted them to know what is likely to be left of places like Harkers Island when the twentieth century gets through with them. They wanted to make sure that any planning and management strategies for the coastal region could take into account the social and cultural resources, as well as the physical resources, of the area. Harkers Island was chosen for the study, Sabella says, because it is in many ways representative of the state's fishing communities.

"There, in a relatively small space, we could look at many different types of fishing and many different sizes and types of fishing craft," Sabella says. "The same kinds of fishing are done in other parts of North Carolina, but not all of them in the same place. And, of course, the boat-building is there as well."

Harkers Island's fishing tradition began in several nineteenth-century fishing and whaling communities on Shackleford Banks -- villages like Edge of the Woods, Mullet Pond, and Diamond City. Many of Harkers Island's ancestors settled the island after a series of storms between 1850 and 1900 drove them off Shackleford. Defining the role of fishing in the community was a primary concern of the researchers. Fewer than half of the 143 commercial fishermen on Harkers Island fish full-time; the rest piece together incomes from boat-building or outside jobs. But though they are few in number, the fishermen show a great diversity in the ways they work, trawling, dredging, netting, raking, kicking, hooking, and tonging almost everything that swims in the salt.

Harkers Island fishermen have a reputation for inventiveness. In the 1930s they developed, apparently independently of other regions, the technique of channel-netting for shrimp. The

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A commercial fishing boat leaves Harkers Island at dawn, heading for a day's work.
Photo by Steve Murray

practice was almost unknown elsewhere on the East Coast until recently, when fishermen to the south became attracted by the fuel-saving advantages of the net. A channel net is "set" in place and relies on the flow of tides, not the pull of a boat, to trap the shrimp.

The islanders have developed a system of self-regulation regarding the fisheries. A rigorous set of unwritten laws governs the use of prime channel-netting locations -- laws enforced primarily by social pressures within the community. Sabella and Hepburn found similar regulation in the long-haul and long-line fisheries. Captains of long-haul crews meet informally at the beginning of each season and list the best fishing locations. They assign a sequence that allows the crews to rotate through the best fishing locations.

Partly because they are accustomed to regulating themselves, the fishermen of Harkers Island view governmental agencies with suspicion. Responding to a survey that asked who they thought had the most influence on fisheries policy-making, the Harkers Island fishermen placed commercial fishermen last among five groups. Officials from North Carolina's Division of Marine Fisheries, however, said that they weigh the fishermen's opinions higher than all other groups but one, the seafood dealers.

Increasingly fishermen and officials agree on the best ways to publicize new policies, and, in some cases, Harkers Island fishermen have even begun to ask for more state regulation. Sixty percent of the commercial fishermen surveyed wanted the state to outlaw clam-kicking, which has been suspected of damaging shellfish nursery areas. As Sabella points out, many of the new problems facing fishermen -- competition from sports-fishermen, rising fuel costs, pollution and scarce supplies of some species -- are beyond the fishermen's control.

Ben Brooks, a Harkers Island native who fishes commercially full-time, believes that his way of life is in serious trouble, largely because of the scramble for new gear, bigger boats, and bigger catches.

"You have to go harder to make a living," he says. "You have less leisure time. You could have a certain trawl this year, catching shrimp, and next year somebody could pop up a new idea, and the following year, you'll probably have to get a new trawl."

"The thing you have to ask yourself is, will we continue to have small fishing operations?" Marcus Hepburn says. "It could go the route of agriculture: bigger business units, bigger boats. And if that happens, the Harkers Island fishermen won't be able to adapt. They enjoy their independence and won't give it up."

But Sabella and Hepburn point out that, even if they lose their boats tomorrow, fishermen on Harkers Island won't be helpless.

"These people have a wide range of skills," he says. "A lot of them have built their own homes, in addition to their own boats. They do electrical work, they do mechanical work, they work with hydraulics. They are rich in ability and intelligence, and they're perfectly capable of taking care of themselves."

Most of the Island's fishermen assume that fishing has a future there. Even so the pressures are making some islanders think twice. In a study of how fishermen's wives regard their lives and their husbands' careers, Sabella and Hepburn found that almost half of the women surveyed were opposed to their sons becoming fishermen. But, as Sabella points out, "the women are very supportive of their husbands, in the sense that they

realize that the men are happy on the water, that they are their own bosses, that nobody interferes with them, and that it's a good life."

"The fishermen's wives almost unanimously said that their lives were tougher than other women's," Sabella says. "They think that fishing is not adequately rewarded, financially. But that still doesn't mean, when everything is said and done, that they wouldn't rather stay in fishing."

Whatever the hardships, Sabella found that an extraordinary number of the island's daughters chose to remain there. Joann Brooks, who was not raised on the island, but inherited the life there when she married Ben Brooks, expresses it this way: "There's a closeness that you have over there that you don't have other places." Fishing on the island cannot be clearly understood, Sabella points out, without an understanding of the boat-building there. Many fishermen build boats; most boat-builders fish; and each group needs the other.

When Ebenezer Harker bought what was, in the mid-1700s, called Craney Island, he listed his occupation as "boatwright;" but if boat-building took root on Harkers Island with Harker, it lay dormant until Brady Lewis started a small boat-yard in 1926. It was a natural match. Fishermen needed boats, and the material -- Atlantic white cedar lumber -- was handy. Boat-yards sprouted and refused to die, even in the face of competition from big companies manufacturing boats of fiber glass and metal. Today, there are 41 people building boats on the island, many working in their back yards.

Like most of the builders, 72-year-old Earl Rose has spent as much time fishing as he has building boats. What he has learned about fishing has often found its way into refinements in his boats. Once, there was all the business the island's boat-builders could handle, Rose says. Not so this year. The boatworks on the island, he explains, are being squeezed by high fuel costs, labor costs, and interest rates; yet Rose is unimpressed by arguments that wooden boats and craftsmanship are out of date.

"There will always be people who want wooden boats," he says. "There lays a boat right off yonder that is about forty-three years old, and it's still a good work boat. The man uses 'er in the roughest kind of weather, in the ocean."

Nevertheless, there is concern that boat-building on the island is far from healthy. One factor is lumber, which is becoming scarce. Most of the island's boat-builders say that if the lumber runs out they would quit building rather than switch to some other material.

Traditions, like nets, are well-tended. Families cling together. Churches are abundant. The community has always convened for informal, cooperative enterprises. An annual pony-penning on Shackleford Banks, during which islanders brand new foals, has survived for generations. Islanders share not only their brogue, but also a rich oral history and a singular tradition of folklore, folk medicine and local idioms. Sons grow up working side by side with fathers, uncles, and cousins. Fishing and boat-building skills are passed along through informal apprenticeships.

However rich the traditions, there are signs that their grip on the island is weakening. The islanders have kept their personal independence, Hepburn says, largely because of their ability to remain almost self-sufficient in an age of specialization and dependence. Many of the islanders can recall living for months without any need for money. Supper was waiting in the sound. There were no electric bills. No paying job called them away from a boat that needed repair or a neighbor who needed help. Most of that has changed. To compete, fishermen are buying bigger boats and going more deeply into debt. Fuel is suddenly a major expense. The cost of real estate on the island, thanks to the swelling population, is approaching big-city prices, so that young people who try to buy their own place face dizzying mortgages.

The islanders have found that debt and mortgages demand substantial, reliable incomes, which a fisherman or boat-builder finds hard to come by. Sabella and Hepburn speak of fishing and boat-building as the two traditions most critical to the old way of life on Harkers Island. If they fall, the chain of 'vocational succession' will be broken. Such a collapse of the island's social structure is a greater threat to the way of life there than tourism. Some residents have been alarmed about what they believe will be an invasion of "dingbatters" (tourists and recreational fishermen) if the National Park Service follows through on its plan to build a visitors' center on the southern end of the island. Others are reassured by the Park Service offer to route tourist traffic around the heart of the island.

Sabella and Hepburn will not try to predict the future of Harkers Island. But in an era when it is fashionable to speak of waters, earth, and forests as "resources," Hepburn and Sabella point out that the way of life on Harkers Island is a resource as well -- a cultural resource that has given the islanders satisfaction for generations; and, because North Carolina's fishing communities are similar, the things that threaten Harkers Island are likely to affect other fishing villages, where the way of life, often equally revered, is facing the same abrupt intrusion of development, tourism, and change.