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## A confidential report concludes that Atlantic cod is endangered

BY PAULINE COMEAU

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WORD THAT THE FEDERAL government would partially re-open the cod fishery in Newfoundland and Labrador in May reached Dr. Kim Bell the same way it reached other Canadians -- through newspaper reports.

But Bell, a specialist in fish ecology, has more than a passing interest in the subject. For more than three years he studied the state of Atlantic cod for the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC), the body that develops Canada's national list of species at risk. Cod is the first commercial marine fish species to be studied by COSEWIC. Bell says that when he started, he could not imagine that cod, such an essential part of Newfoundland life, could be in trouble. He has since changed his mind.

"On a by-management-area basis, the advised designations range from Lower Risk to Critically Endangered," concludes the confidential status report submitted to COSEWIC at its April general meeting and obtained by *Canadian Geographic*. "As a single unit, the advised designation ... is ENDANGERED."

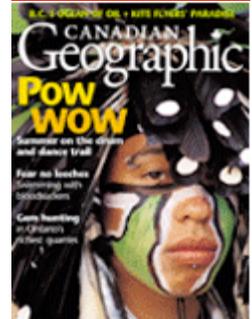
That opinion was reached after reviewing hundreds of documents from independent scientists and government sources, including the [Department of Fisheries and Oceans](#) (DFO), the federal department responsible for managing the cod fishery.

Weighing that information against Environment Canada criteria and COSEWIC's general guidelines, Bell determined that the Atlantic cod population as a whole was endangered. He then provided a stock-by-stock analysis -- ranging from low risk/vulnerable to endangered -- of cod in 10 geographic areas managed by DFO. Half were in the more serious category.

On April 17, 10 days before the federal election call, DFO minister Fred Mifflin announced that 6,000 tonnes of cod could be taken from the northern Gulf of St. Lawrence and off the west coast of Newfoundland, and 10,000 tonnes from the southern Newfoundland coast.

Bell cited DFO's own information to show that re-opening was "at odds with recent DFO reports," including a 1996 DFO paper which labelled the stock in the northern Gulf of St. Lawrence and western Newfoundland as "very low" and southern Newfoundland stock "to be at a low level of abundance."

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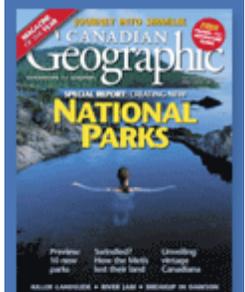


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"I can only hope that they know something I don't know," says Bell of the federal government's decision to re-open the fishery. "If they don't, it is a big mistake."

COSEWIC has been developing its national species at risk list since 1979, based, according to its published mandate, on the best scientific evidence available. Politics is not supposed to play a part in decisions, despite the fact that COSEWIC's 20-odd members include representatives from the wildlife departments of the 12 provincial and territorial governments, federal departments and agencies involved with wildlife -- including the Canadian Wildlife Service (which serves as secretariat), Parks Canada and DFO. Three national non-governmental organizations are also members: the Canadian Wildlife Federation, Canadian Nature Federation, and World Wildlife Fund Canada. Its findings are advisory and carry no legal weight.

What Bell and other scientists have discovered, however, is that politics play a central role when a species such as cod is under review.

While Bell's final report (after extensive input on earlier drafts from DFO and others) was submitted by COSEWIC's December 1996 deadline, it was delayed internally and failed to reach the broader membership until about six weeks before the committee's annual meeting in April. Several COSEWIC members believe the delay was the result of resistance from DFO officials.

"I think there was a plan to make it late," says a government COSEWIC member who was one of several who asked not to be identified. "And I hope it doesn't happen next year."

COSEWIC chair Dr. Erich Haber says the late arrival of such a complex report would force members to defer official discussion until 1998. Still, he believed the text was ready for review and, against DFO's written objections that it had come in too late, Haber submitted it.

"I have seen a lot of status reports," says Haber, who has been with COSEWIC since 1981. "It is as good as I have ever seen in regards to content."

In a move that some view as a breach of the non-partisan posture of COSEWIC, DFO took the unusual step of writing to provincial counterparts before the annual meeting asking that DFO's concerns about the cod report be passed on to representatives.

"I think that it pushed it a little bit," says former COSEWIC chair, Chris Shank, who saw the letter. "It is veiled interference."

While debate is an integral part of COSEWIC's process, one would be hard pressed to find views as divergent as those between DFO officials and independent scientists when it comes to cod and Bell's report. "To declare a species endangered when there are hundreds of millions of them ... is ludicrous," says DFO director-general fisheries and ocean science, Dr. Bill Doubleday.

The many criticisms of Bell's report by DFO are familiar to the scientific community -- environmental factors are largely to blame for the decline, huge fluctuations in populations are normal for cod, and faulty criteria, similar to those used by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (which placed cod on its Red List last year) were used by Bell.

Doubleday also argues that the quota allowed for the partial re-opening is a fraction of what was fished in the 1980s and that the fishery is needed to gather more information "which is hard to get if you don't have enough people fishing."



Jeffrey Hutchings, a biologist with Dalhousie University in Halifax, has faced similar arguments for more than a decade. He obtained a DFO report released after the re-opening that supports Bell's conclusions. "If we are not overfishing, we are not far away," he says. The role of politics in the cod debate has led him and other biologists in the May issue of the Canadian Journal of Fisheries and Aquatic Science for a "complete separation of science and government."

"The minister can make decisions that appear to be based on science when in fact they are not," he says.

Bell remains frustrated by the protracted and acrimonious debate that seems more political than scientific. This summer, he will leave for a year's fellowship in South Africa and worries that he will be unable to defend his work at COSEWIC's 1998 annual meeting.

His worry may be unnecessary. At their last meeting, COSEWIC struck a criteria committee to develop more formal guidelines on which to determine risk designations. Headed by Kathryn Bruce, DFO director-general, policy and strategy science, the committee is to present recommendations by October. "The criteria committee was formed at DFO's insistence," said one long-time COSEWIC member who asked not to be identified.

The deferred cod report will, says Bill Doubleday, have to be "revisited in light of the criteria." This is news to Erich Haber and others. Haber still expects the cod report to be debated next year as does Bob Campbell, chair of the fish and marine mammals sub-committee. "This may be the argument DFO will use to have the cod report deferred for another year," says Campbell.

"Irrespective of whether or not cod should be fished, this process stinks," says Hutchings. Said another COSEWIC member, "The whole thing has the potential to destroy COSEWIC."

*Pauline Comeau is associate editor of Canadian Geographic.*

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