



DIANA NETHERCOTT

Coasts under stress

Many of our coastal communities are in crisis. What can we do to fix them?

Ommer

by Jessica Gillies

When researchers from a massive bi-coastal research project wanted to know how environmental, social and economic changes are affecting rural, resource-based communities, they went straight to the source.

“We have a huge respect for the ecological knowledge of local people,” says project director and University of Victoria historian Dr. Rosemary Ommer. “We tried to see what was happening through their eyes.”

The \$6.2-million Coasts Under Stress project, co-led by UVic and Memorial University of Newfoundland, brought together more than 70 social and natural scientists for an unprecedented study of remote communities on the east and west coasts of Canada.

The project examined the history of these communities, their resource bases, their economies over time, and the way in which the lives of people are embedded in the environments to which they belong and on which they depend.

Research focused on areas as diverse as traditional aquaculture, food security, fisheries, offshore oil and gas development, community health, policy

formation and resource management.

The five-year project, which ended in 2006, concluded that coastal communities are “in crisis” due to collapsed or damaged ecosystems, and that the natural resource industries on which these communities depend are unravelling.

Even though the two coasts are different in many ways, the research clearly shows that communities are collapsing in both regions. “This tells us that the problem is structural,” says Ommer. “It’s the policies we’ve put into place.

“Declines in the fishing and forest industries are the result, not only of global market conditions, but of consistently poor development and regulation strategies, coupled with over-harvesting.”

Project researchers also found that the links between different industries are critical and that large-scale policies with short-term benefits are hurting coastal communities and their resources in the long-term.

For example, UVic researcher Dr. Brian Bornhold discovered that wood debris from log-handling sites in places such as Clio Bay on B.C.’s north coast was doing “extraordinary damage” to the seafloor ecosystem by changing the marine life that lives there.

“Things like the commercially desirable Dungeness

crab couldn’t find their habitat anymore,” says Ommer. “What we were doing in the logging industry was damaging the potential for the fishing industry.”

When researchers spoke with residents of the coastal communities, they found it isn’t just the natural resources that are struggling. The people are under stress, too.

Interviews by UVic graduate student Sulan Dai in Ucluelet, Tofino and Port Alberni revealed that unemployment, income insecurity, and shrinking health and education services are all constant anxieties faced by coastal residents.”

“Despite that, people still want to stay there,” says Ommer. “We found a huge attachment to place, and that one of the stresses was having to leave a place they really love and where they’ve been for generations. So these policies are affecting everything—the economy, social welfare and human health.”

The project team developed a range of policy suggestions designed to alleviate or reverse many of the negative impacts on coastal communities.

“There’s a need for wider-based thinking on a national scale, otherwise our local communities are going to die,” says Ommer. “We need them—for their culture, for their way of life, and for the protection and stewardship of our resources.”

EDGEwise

The results of the Coasts Under Stress project include numerous presentations to policy-makers and scholars, seven books, and hundreds of other publications. For more information, visit www.coastunderstress.ca.

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Social conflict and decay during fisheries crises will be one of the topics tackled at a Feb. 21-22 forum at UVic on “Are We Killing the World’s Oceans?” Join leading international researchers and government decision-makers to discuss issues critical to the future of Earth’s oceans. To register visit www.uvic.ca/research/oceansforum or call 250-472-4747.

The forum kicks off at 7:30 p.m. on Feb. 21 with a free public lecture on “Are We Past the Point of No Return in Mining Fish From the Sea?” by Dr. Daniel Pauly, director of the Fisheries Centre, UBC, and a vocal critic of current fishing practices. The lecture takes place in the University Centre Farquhar Auditorium. Reserve seats at 250-721-8480 or visit www.auditorium.uvic.ca.

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