

# Trusts as a Commons Solution: The Case of Fishery Trusts

**The trust is to the commons what corporations are to the market: the best way to get things done.**

BY [DAVID BOLLIER](#)

It's no secret that ocean fisheries are depleting more rapidly than they can replenish themselves, thanks to aggressive industrial fishing. But now it appears that independent commercial fishermen in New England and Alaska have come up with a better alternative: the trust, a classic commons solution. Eric Siy, executive director of the [Alaska Marine Conservation Council](#), reports that the [Cape Cod Commercial Hook Fishermen](#) and [Environmental Defense](#) have forged a partnership to establish Sustainable Fisheries Trusts in Alaska and New England. Siy writes:

These trusts will provide independent fishermen in each region with the means (financial and technical) to compete with an increasingly corporatized fishing industry that cares little about protecting marine habitats and the coastal communities that have long depended on them and that represent the best stewards of the resource. The trusts will invest directly in these fishermen and their conservation practices to help counter the devastating impacts of corporate fishing, namely through bottom trawling.

One tool pioneered by the Alaska Marine Conservation Council is a marketing logo, [Catch of the Season](#), which can be used only for wild seafood harvested using selective fishing practices that minimize waste and impacts on sensitive marine habitats. The logo has come to denote a premium seafood as opposed to fish raised in industrialized farms (aquaculture that cause all sorts of ecological harm).

The new Sustainable Fisheries Trusts plans to use a portion of revenue from the [Catch of the Season](#) catches to capitalize the Trusts, thus creating a positive feedback loop that has fishermen, fishing communities, fisheries conservation benefiting all the way around."

The Cape Cod Commercial Hook Fishermen is seeking a better way to balance commercial fishing with ecological respect. It credits its philosophy of trust and collaboration amongst like-minded industry groups, conservation organizations, local communities, scientists, recreational fishermen and decision-makers. Effective policy is built on the backs of well-informed stakeholders that are capable of forging through disagreements to find common ground."

This news about fisheries trusts is further confirmation of Peter Barnes' contention that the trust is to the commons as the corporation is to the market. Trusts are being used in all sorts of different realms as a way to preserve common assets. Barnes has proposed a Sky Trust for managing revenues generated by auctions that sell pollution rights. But there are trusts that manage land, newspapers, indigenous crops, genomic data, and oil for the commons. Examples:

- **The Potato Trust** is a mechanism by which indigenous people in Peru act as stewards of rare potato crops. They help maintain the crop and control access, but outsider researchers still have access to genetic information contained in the potatoes.
  - The charitable trust is being used as a system to manage genomic biobanks (tissue and health data), as David E. Winickoff and Richard N. Winickoff describe in the **New England Journal of Medicine**.
  - **The St. Petersburg (Florida) Times** is a trust that is managed by the Poynter Institute. The trust structure helps the newspaper avoid the corporate imperative to constantly improve profits by cutting staff; it can afford to provide excellent reportage and serve the community.
  - **The Land and Water Conservation Fund**, though repeatedly under-funded by the Bush administration, channels revenues from offshore oil drilling to state conservation and recreation.
- Beyond this list and other familiar examples public libraries, national parks, scientific knowledge commons, software protected by the General Public License it would be useful to develop a richer taxonomy of trusts that manage commons resources. (If you have further examples to add, please send them to me at bollier[at]essential.org.) There are already plenty of existing examples to show that stakeholder trusts can achieve things that neither government nor markets can: responsible and equitable long-term management of a shared resource.

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