

Brian Cheuvront, PhD — Environmental Psychologist

A LITTLE HELP, PLEASE?

The numbers speak for themselves.

According to the Environmental Defense Fund, 87 percent of the world's assessed fish stocks are at the breaking point, classified as exploited or fully exploited. One out of every two fish stocks in the U.S. is either overfished or at risk of being overfished, or there are insufficient data to assess exactly how they are doing.

Sea life around the world is in jeopardy, but it has a champion in environmental psychologist Brian Cheuvront, PhD.

Protecting marine life is not only Cheuvront's career, it is his mission. His day job entails helping to enforce the federal law against overfishing certain species. This includes two major responsibilities: 1) explaining to commercial and recreational fishermen why and how fishing regulations are changed, and 2) analyzing how fishermen respond to these new rules.

Both require his background in environmental psychology for him to be effective.

Cheuvront works at the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council in North Charleston, S.C., which protects nearly 100 marine species living along the coasts of North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia and Florida. And though it's not an easy job, it's necessary to help preserve the world's increasingly fragile marine ecosystems.

CHOPPY WATERS

The relationship between fishermen and environmental psychologists is complicated. In many ways, the recommendations of Cheuvront and his colleagues run directly counter to fishermen's livelihoods. Understandably, it's an emotionally charged issue.

Throughout the South Atlantic region, Cheuvront attends public hearings to discuss the most recent rules and regulations, and offers fishermen a chance to present their side of the story. Because livelihoods are involved, it becomes personal quickly.

"We've had to do some very, very difficult things in terms of regulating what they can do on the water," says Cheuvront. "Our job is to explain the situation to them as clearly as possible, hear them out and when possible, help them figure out what choices they can make."

Because each fishery has a quota on how many fish can be caught, and hence on the number of fishermen who can fish there, the result can be a "first-come-first-served mentality" that leaves some fishermen catchless and angry.

It's during these public hearings when Cheuvront's skills as a psychologist come into play, from active listening to persuasive speaking to perspective taking.

"While technically I'm representing the council, I also let [the fisherman] know I understand where they are coming from," he adds. "The process sometimes allows them to change the way a policy is put into practice, such as deciding when a fishery must be closed."

EQUITABLE CHANGE

Cheuvront also leverages his background in psychology when measuring the economic, social and behavioral effects of the new regulations.

"We have substantial data sets, so I do a lot of research related to problem-solving, puzzle-solving and 'what if' scenarios," he says.

Much of his work entails analyzing complex predictions of the number of fish living in South Atlantic fisheries over a specific period of time and connecting that to ways that fisherman can or will alter their behavior following regulation changes.

"It's a difficult balance, making sure we protect a natural resource while trying to do the right thing by people," says Cheuvront. "But in the long run, I think it's going to be the right thing."



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CLIMATE AND ENVIRONMENTAL PSYCHOLOGY

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