



The Dark Side of Safety

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The Dark Side of Safety

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INTRODUCTION

BY JOE MARGRAF, AFS PRESIDENT

I feel so strongly about safety in the fisheries profession that I wanted to devote my column to the following piece written by our Second Vice President Scott A. Bonar. Bonar was compelled to write this by the sudden and untimely death of one of his graduate students. His article takes on the often hidden and unspoken side of safety that is usually a small but very significant part of any profession. Before Bonar continues, as is my usual style, I want to relay a very personal story from my own life. About 10 years ago, I suffered from anxiety disorder. After two trips to the emergency room because I experienced heart attack-like symptoms, I began to realize that I had a different problem. Prescription drugs and therapy brought me out of it with time. I never experienced thoughts of suicide, thank goodness, but I did feel the strong desire to avoid human contact. This can happen to anyone, at any time, during their life. Like any form of safety, being aware is the most important way to begin.

THE DEADLY FISHERIES SAFETY ISSUE NO ONE DISCUSSES

Commercial fisheries is well known as one of the most dangerous civilian professions in which one can engage (BLS 2016). Icy decks, sinking boats, turbulent rivers, and car crashes when going to remote sampling locations can all lead to devastating losses for fisheries workers, their families, and their friends. Many of the hazards facing fisheries biologists are similar. These traditional threats are discussed in most fisheries journals and AFS techniques books (e.g., Professional Safety Committee 2008; Berry et al. 2013), alerting those new to the profession to its inherent dangers. However, we are usually silent about another killer that lurks in our community.

Two months ago, I was devastated to learn of the passing of one of my recent students. Possibly overwhelmed with a new career, the stresses inherent in our job with being asked to do more work with fewer resources, moving to a new location, or other factors, the biologist took his own life. His death had a shattering effect on everyone in his personal and professional life. Like many, I struggled for answers: “How could someone who was so well liked, whose future seemed so promising, who seemed in such good spirits, do such a thing?” I wondered. This followed on the heels of another incident where an old fisheries biologist friend took his life about six months earlier.

When tragedies like these happen, friends and colleagues try to make sense of them. In the course of the agonizing analysis, other sad stories tend to surface. A great many fisheries professionals have known the shock, sorrow, and bewilderment that follow such seemingly senseless loss.

Especially now, many of us in the natural resource profession face increasingly uncertain times. Reduced budgets, limited

understanding and appreciation by some people of the important work we do, a closing window to counter climate change, and reductions in fish populations and outdoor opportunities that existed earlier in our lives create additional stress and powerlessness. Sometimes this additional stress can lead to depression.

Depression and its sister disease anxiety are strikingly common phenomena in our society (NIMH 2017a, 2017b). Approximately 10%–15% of the U.S. population will have a major depressive episode during their lifetimes (Strine et al. 2008); however, few talk about the affliction openly, especially as a job hazard. People get sad, but depression is a feeling of sadness that just won’t go away. It can last for weeks, and those experiencing it can feel sad, withdraw from activities they used to like, and exhibit a lack of hope for the future, among other symptoms (NIMH 2017b). Depression can be triggered by a situation, such as a divorce, failure on the job, a chemical imbalance, or a combination. Many well-known people have suffered from depression, such as President Abraham Lincoln, astronaut Buzz Aldrin, naturalist and explorer Merriweather Lewis, and General George S. Patton (Bonar 2007). Charles Darwin—because of the anxiety he felt that the book he was writing, *On the Origin of Species*, would be so counter to what his friends and family believed—became a virtual recluse, rarely venturing from his house.

How might we battle this malady and avoid a catastrophic outcome? I interviewed renowned Tucson psychiatrist James Gray, ranked by his colleagues into the prestigious “Best Doctors in America.” I told Gray of the losses we have faced in our profession and asked him specifically how we scientists and managers, often working in remote locations and facing specific types of stress, might recognize warning signs and seek help if they are present in ourselves or our colleagues. Gray provided many useful tips. If you notice a colleague who seems out of sorts, be sure to tell them that you have noticed specific behaviors and ask them what is going on. Often we are reluctant to ask, but this is an important first step. If they say they have been feeling bad for some time and cannot seem to snap out of it, ask them if they would be willing to see a doctor or therapist. If they don’t want to talk about it, express your concern and say that you are available to listen and are willing to help if they would like to talk about anything in the future. Realize that we tend to minimize things we might notice, and it is natural for us to tell ourselves that everything is okay with someone when it may not be. Clinical depression is marked by a depressed mood much of the day, possibly worse in the morning, and a loss of interest in normal activities and relationships. If these symptoms are present in you for more than two weeks, you should treat them seriously and go in for a checkup. Don’t ignore them, any more than you would ignore sharp pains in your chest. Realize that loved ones, friends, and acquaintances, from areas and distances you could not imagine, would be devastated by your loss. Also understand that although depression can occur in different forms in different people, the

Continued on page 241

prognosis for improvement when treated is very, very good! Why continue to suffer?

A person who endures hours of handling fish in ice-cold weather or works late into the night on tedious data analysis prides him or herself in being tough. Therefore, we feel no joy in admitting that we might suffer from either depression or anxiety. However, I can attest that treatments do work, and a dark day can turn brighter. This is because I have experienced the mind-numbing black curtains of depression myself. Sometimes all that is needed is the caring word of a friend, a funny story, or your own determination not to spend your days in a funk that can drive you to get the help you need.

Depression is a treatable disease just like diabetes, high cholesterol, or a bad knee. We as a *profession* need to commit ourselves to taking this safety issue seriously and attach no more stigma to it than we would a person trying to control their blood pressure. You as a *colleague* need to talk and express concern to a friend you might notice who is in need. You as a *fisheries professional* need to learn that it is a sign of toughness to have the courage to seek out and receive needed help to take care of yourself.

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Policy Column continued from page 184

ecosystems” (MAFMC 2017a). With input from its own EAFM advisory panel and planning committee, the original guidance was updated in August 2016 (MAFMC 2017b). The next significant contributions to the ecosystem vision were the NOAA Fisheries policy statement (NOAA Fisheries 2016a) and road map (NOAA Fisheries 2016b), two documents that shifted managers from theory to practice.

Note one important difference between the MAFMC and NOAA Fisheries strategies. As described above, the MAFMC designed its “approach” to bolster traditional species-specific management with ecosystem principles and expectations (MAFMC 2017a). Their EAFM appears to be an approach or step toward managing fish on an ecosystem basis. On the other hand, NOAA Fisheries made a conscious effort to step beyond an ecosystem approach and toward fishery management “based” on ecosystem principles. The two approaches might not be quite so distinct, as I noticed that Coakley and Moore (2016) used “based” in their title when talked about their approach.

I sense a distinction. That broader base may be intended to better inform decisions regarding trade-offs among and between fisheries (commercial, recreational, and subsistence), aquaculture, protected species, biodiversity, and habitats (NOAA Fisheries 2016a). The NOAA guidance goes on to recognize the interconnectedness of ecosystem components and resilient and productive ecosystems (including the human communities on which they depend). Eventually we might embrace ecosystem management (without a qualifier) of our oceans that becomes less fish-centric and more inclusive of other users and uses. Recent efforts on coastal and marine spatial planning provide the best glimpse of that promising approach.

There are reasonable parallels of that marine experience from inland fisheries. The United Nation's Food and Agriculture Organization encourages inclusive approaches because freshwater fisheries are strongly affected by other water and land users. The United Nation's Food and Agriculture Organization website (<http://www.fao.org/fishery/topic/16034/en>) describes more of an EBFM approach to engage stakeholders and manage fisheries with appropriate consideration of societal needs, all without jeopardizing the options for future generations. Globally, such efforts may be most advanced in large rivers and lakes, especially those with shared management jurisdictions.

Ecosystem considerations are here to stay. Let's make the most of them as we implement recommendations from our “Future of the Nation's Aquatic Resources” report (AFS 2017) and prepare for the 2017 AFS Annual Meeting in Tampa (see the AFS home page).

Note: This column represents my personal opinions. They do not necessarily represent those of the American Fisheries Society. Comments are invited at tbigford@fisheries.org.

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