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## Seadrift Journal; In Texas, Shrimpers Lament: 'It's Over'

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Kathy Yarborough was sitting on a broken chair in the little office at Froggies fish house, smoking cigarettes, chatting with friends and happily letting the afternoon pass. Then her 2-year-old son, Donny Paul, intruded by announcing his ambition.

"I'm going to get me a big boat," he said grandly, "and I'm going to catch you the big shrimp, Mama." "Oh, no," she replied sadly. Outside, the piers of San Antonio Bay were lined with pug-nosed shrimp boats, rusting and idle. Among them was the vessel that Butch Yarborough, a shrimper for 15 years, built for himself. He had hoped to pass it on to Donny Paul and his other sons, but he was driven into debt by a succession of bad seasons. Since January he has worked in a petrochemical plant.

For generations the people of Seadrift, a town of weathered clapboard cottages and rickety house trailers, made their living from the many estuaries and shallow bays on this stretch of the Texas coast about 50 miles northeast of Corpus Christi. But for a variety of reasons, the shrimp are no longer abundant, and only the big white jellyfish known locally as cannonballs seem to thrive in those brown waters now.

This summer the shrimp catch was so bad that the doyenne of Froggies, Diane Wilson, went on a hunger strike for several days. "I read up on civil disobedience and such things," she said, "and I figured we should start protesting how they are putting environmental laws on us while all the cities and farms and industries keep wrecking our water."

During her fast, many shrimpers came by the fish house, where their catch is usually weighed and sent off to market. They commiserated and complained, but none heeded her call to action. "All of a sudden I could see it," she said. "We're just like the Indians when the settlers were closing in on them. Even if there is some renegade or another that can still cause a ruckus, the soul is gone from the bay shrimper. Deep down everyone knows it's over. We're doomed."

But while the 1,000 or so people of Seadrift see themselves as the powerless victims of a despoiled habitat, others list them among the despoilers. The burly men with long sideburns seemed fairly helpless one night at a hearing of the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department on a plan to stop depletion of the bays by imposing tight restrictions on where and when shrimping can take place.

Neither the department's commissioners nor any of the experts who drew up the plan came. Instead, an official who conceded "I am a peon" set up a tape recorder, offered to let the shrimpers talk and promised that the cassette would be sent to Austin.

No one in Seadrift doubts that the number of shrimp in the bays is down and that the prices are down, too. Some conceded that overfishing may be partly to blame; Myron Spree, a veteran shrimper, says people here tend to operate "without stopping for a minute to think that maybe the shrimp can't reproduce as fast as we catch them." But most say the problems originate somewhere down the two-lane road that leads out of town and off to the rest of the world.

"We are the catch dogs for everyone who comes along looking for something to kick at," said Jimmy Davenport, owner of the Melanie Dee.

The shrimpers blame importers who have flooded the market for their plight. They blame the damming of rivers, which has made the bays saltier, and they blame industrial plants for polluting the water.

The bay boatmen are the maritime equivalent of small family farmers -isolated, self-employed, valuing their independence above all. Struggling to survive in a perilous niche, often competing with their neighbors, they are so used to facing adversity alone that they rarely join together.

When the Federal Government imposed rules intended to protect an endangered sea turtle in the Gulf of Mexico, the big shrimpers who operate there staged protests, and the Bush Administration reconsidered. The bay shrimpers have never raised their voices that effectively.

With a new plastics plant opening on Lavaca Bay, some, like Mrs. Wilson, are urging legal action against further pollution. But the response has been ambivalent at best.

"We know what chemical plants can do to the water, sure we do," said Mr. Davenport. "But we can't fight big interests like industry because we'll get stepped on."

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