

'FOR HIRE' IN THE US GULF OF MEXICO: A Typology of Offshore Charter and Party Boat Operations

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ABSTRACT In the summer of 1998, research was conducted with the 'for hire' recreational fisheries along the US gulf coast. From a random sample of offshore charter boats and from an entire population of offshore party boats operating in Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana and Texas, one hundred and seventeen in-person interviews were completed. A typology of operators engaged in the 'for hire' industry was developed from respondent led data. Four main types of fishing operators are identified from characteristic trends that emerge out of the data, leading to a separation between types that are not dependent on the fisheries for their livelihoods (called Periphery operators) and types that are dependent on the fisheries for their livelihoods (called Core operators). A majority of these Core operators are 'traditional' – that is, they engage in a family tradition of fishing that closely parallels characteristics found in the commercial fishing sector.

Introduction

Fisheries management in the United States has historically been problematic. As fisheries became increasingly populated with new entrants, competition for the resource intensified, as did political positioning. Two major sectors developed out of the resource demands from user groups that had differing needs and ideologies: the commercial sector and the recreational sector. Offshore charter and party boat operators were uncomfortably caught between these two sectors.

During the summer of 1998, I was employed as a researcher for the Department of Wildlife and Fisheries Sciences at Texas A&M University. The purpose of this research was to build a better knowledge base for National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) of a specific segment of the recreational sector – charter and party boat operators. This paper is derived from data obtained from a combined research effort that includes the survey instrument of the original NMFS-funded research, and an expanded conversational interview with charter and party boat operators from Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana and Texas in 1998 (Sutton, Ditton, Stoll and Milon 1999; Norris-Raynbird 2000). From this combined field research, emerged a typology of charter and party boat fishing operations that supports the legitimacy and socio-economic importance of this sector.

Why is the Study of Recreational Operators Important?

Typically, when we think of commercial fishermen, a picture comes to mind of rough and hardy men and women (although the stereotype is male) ploughing the

waters through calm and storm in search of a heavy catch. They are the farmers of the sea – living spartan, isolated and sometimes bleak lives. And just as tilling the soil is synonymous with the heart of America, so too is harvesting the sea. We think of this as serious work – work that has been respected and protected by public and government alike from the bawling cry of this nation.¹ Whether or not these images represent reality, they are firmly entrenched in the understanding of commercial fishing as an industry that encompasses the small independent fisherman, commercial fleets, processing plants, brokerage houses, domestic and export markets.

Recreational fishing holds quite a different image. Here, perhaps Veblen (1994) captured the American notions of leisure and recreation best. Picture the Veblenesque *American sportsman* (sport too has historically fallen under a paradigm of maleness), in the practice of pseudo-ruggedness as passage to manhood. Compared to work, recreation is something deliberately less serious; an activity done for relaxation or a reward for hard work in our leisure time. But there is also a connotation of elitism, in that recreation (or at least many forms of recreation) is not necessarily accessible to all, and certainly not at the same levels of investment. Within recreational fishing alone, there are almost unlimited choices as to the kind of fishing available. Some forms of recreational fishing are decidedly more elitist than others, but all forms require some combination of time and money outlay. The time and money costs attributed to recreation, separate this activity from the necessities of life and place it in the realm of quality of life – a squishy, abstract sort of thing that is removed from the hard realities of earning a living.² Leisure and recreation in achievement-oriented American society are pleasurable luxuries, and as such, might be regarded in some quarters as negotiable – perhaps even frivolous.

The History Behind ‘Recreational’ and ‘Commercial’

There are numerous factors affecting the determination of which fishery (recreational or commercial) provides the best description for charter and party boat operators. Originally, operators were considered by fisheries management agencies to be part of the commercial fishery. The definition of commercial fishing as expressed by the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council in 1989, adhered to an all encompassing definition: ‘(t)hose fishermen earning their livelihood from the fishery’ (Sutton, Ditton, Stoll and Milon 1999). This alignment with livelihood from the fishery when coupled with the fact that many charter fishers and a few party boat operators fish commercially to augment their earnings, appears to make a good argument for these fishers to be categorized in the commercial fishery. It is also an alignment that validates their fishing efforts.

With the perception of limitless fish resources the argument might have held. But in the 1970’s alarms went off regarding the sustainability of fish resources, and this set in motion changes within the fisheries that would render the argument problematic. Over the next two decades increasing constraints on the number of fish the sea could give up without placing stocks in jeopardy resulted in fish quotas. The introduction of the concept of Total Allowable Catch (TAC) necessarily raised a value conflict between fish that were designated for market production and fish that were designated for sport. As the fisheries and the management of them grew

more complex, so too did the voluminous amendments to that body of legislation enacted in 1976 intended to preserve fish stocks. The Magnuson Act found that: 'These fishery resources contribute to the food supply, economy, and health of the Nation and provide recreational opportunities.'³ The emphasis appears quite clear. The health/wealth of the nation is tacitly situated in the sector of commercial fishing. This point is illustrated further by the Act's definition of commercial fishing as '...fishing in which the fish harvested, either in whole or in part, are intended to enter commerce or enter commerce through sale, barter or trade'. An amendment to the Act in 1989 instituted separate TACS for the recreational and commercial sectors.

The Act (renamed the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act in 1996) defines recreational fishing as '...fishing for sport or pleasure'. Charter fishing is defined as '...fishing from a vessel carrying a passenger for hire... who is engaged in recreational fishing'.⁴ This definition includes recreational fishing done from party boats. It would appear from these definitions that charter fishers are now considered recreational fishers by management agencies. But the definitions stop short of specifically placing charter/party boat operators within the recreational sector. This may be due in part to regulation variation between the fishing zones established by the Magnuson Act of 1976. At that time, the Act established eight regions in United States waters, including Alaska and Hawaii and other U.S. territorial holdings. The Gulf of Mexico is one of the eight regions. An example of regional variation in regulations is one that pertains to the sale of fish harvested on a charter. In the Hawaiian fisheries, charter operators are allowed to sell the catch.⁵ The charter itself is categorized as an activity of recreational fishing, because the *intent* is to fish for sport or pleasure. However, this does not preclude charter operators from selling the fish harvested recreationally. The Gulf of Mexico charter operators are not permitted to engage in the sale of fish harvested on a charter. This Hawaiian fisheries example circumvents by definition, an exclusive link between charter operators and recreational fishing. The link is further undermined by operators who engage in both recreational and commercial fishing activities, sometimes from the same vessel.

In the Gulf of Mexico fishery, charter and party boat operators do not earn their livelihood from the sale of fish, but rather the sale of the *opportunity to fish*. They are managed by fishery regulations imposed on the recreational sector, namely, on their recreational clients. The fish taken on trips provided by these operators are included in the Total Allowable Catch quota of the recreational sector. But the recreational sector is regulated by both state and federal agencies, which promulgate different rules. Overlaps in licensing jurisdiction add to the confusion, as charter operators must be licensed as such through the State, while offshore recreational fishing permits and commercial licenses are Federal jurisdiction.

Methods

For the Sutton *et al.* study (1999), a computer generated random sampling method (SAS 1996) was used. Offshore charter boats were drawn in proportion to the known boat populations in each state. Texas was subdivided into: Texas (Galveston area), Texas (Port Aransas area) and Texas (South Padre Island area). The entire population of party boats was added to the sample of charter boats. From the combined

sample, on hundred and seventeen survey interviews were completed. The expanded field methods for my study ‘piggy-backed’ onto the interview schedule for Sutton *et al.* That is, after each survey was administered, I engaged each participant in conversation using a few consistent prompts. From this, a primarily respondent-lead interview followed during which I took field notes. An in-depth follow-up interview was tape-recorded with one selected key individual in each region. All of these individuals held official positions representing other charter operators and their selections were based on the most frequent referral in a region.

While it was appropriate for the Sutton *et al.* study (with its focus on fishing activities and financial investment) to use boats as the unit of analysis and maintain a distinction between charter and party boats, I did not feel it would be advantageous to my study for several reasons. During the course of the interview process I had discovered that quite a few informants within the sample owned multiple boats. There was an array of operation size and complexity that did not naturally divide charter operations from party boat operations. Some operations included both charter and party boats, and some large capacity charter boats *occasionally* operated as party boats. Often respondents indicated a graduated or combined history from charter boat to party boat operation, or from other sectors of fishing to charter and/or party boat operation.

The one hundred and seventeen interviews were collapsed into one hundred and five operation cases to avoid respondent redundancy from multiple boats. By building operational cases, I was able to present the *people* within their multi-faceted world as business owners and fishers. This in no way discounted the many distinctions between charter and party boat operations, which quite clearly emerged out of their own words. This approach presented charter and party boat operations in a coherent manner focusing on shared issues, histories, dependence on the resource, re-investment and income levels. From these broad categories emerged trends among the cases that roughly separated into four types. ‘Ideal types’ parameters were based on expected values or characteristics. These were then tested with a sample of cases where I reviewed the descriptive statistics from the survey instrument and also the coded content analysis from the post survey interviews. Adjustments to the parameters were made where needed. A case-by-case review followed using the typology guide and each case was coded accordingly. Approximately 19 percent of the cases did not fall neatly into the four types. Interestingly, these did not point to new categories, but rather to clearly delineated splits between existing ones. Thus hybrid categories were created.

Betwixt and Between

Most operators including respondents who hold official positions in organizations representing other charter operators conceptually place themselves as part of the recreational sector. There is, however, an element of confusion that comes through from the recorded follow-up interviews with key individuals who regionally represent other charter and party boat operators. ‘It’s our opinion as I believe it is the federal government’s, that ... the charter boat industry, is put into the recreational fishery because...we fish people who fish for recreation...’ But this respondent notes

the cross-over, ‘...its actually two-fold...(clients) are there to fish for recreation, but its our livelihood’. Others define being part of the recreational sector by virtue of the quota to which they adhere: ‘...and the recreational fisherman...the party boat and charter boat catch 2/3 of the recreational quota...’, or because they don’t sell fish: ‘...we are recognized as recreational fishermen and not a commercial fisherman... ’cause we don’t sell our catch’ and ‘...unlike the commercial fishermen, what we’re selling is opportunity for someone to catch a fish’. One of the key individuals selected for a follow-up recorded interview, refers to charter operators as affiliated with the commercial sector, and does so in describing the political leanings of governors and senators on fisheries issues. This respondent goes back and forth between the two sectors interchanging and overlapping terms: ‘In our state, Governor X is very, very *recreationally* oriented...Senator Y – very much dedicated to the *commercial* head boat and charter boat industry. Senator Z...is pretty much in full support of...the *recreational* interest...’ (emphasis mine). Another respondent put the confusion of being betwixt and between quite succinctly: ‘...so we’ve been kind of like the red headed stepchild. Now that they’re divvying up the resource pie (fish quotas) we want our share too...’

That operators seem to fall into an area between the recreational sector and the commercial sector is far from a moot point. There are significant consequences to being ‘the red headed step-child’. If recreational fishing is viewed as frivolous or even minimally, as less rigorous than commercial fishing, then it follows that an industry that derives its livelihood from it will suffer difficulties in validation, identity, political voice and economic well being.

Insinuations and Connotations

Going into this research, there were vague perceptions that I held suggesting that the charter fishing spectrum ran from ‘elitist pseudo-macho sport’ to ‘beer and guts cruises’. The language of the industry can exacerbate these notions. Most, if not all industries have their own argot. Charter fishers use a combination of fishing specific jargon and industry specific technical terminology. The jargon is quite colourful. Phrases that ordinary North American folk recognize as common clichés or colloquialisms take on an insider meaning in fishing specific applications. For instance, ‘six-pack’ turns out to be a charter vessel licensed by the U.S. Coast Guard for six passengers, rather than a six-pack of beer or other beverage. ‘Party boat’ is used interchangeably with ‘head boat’, albeit with regional preferences, both referring to a multi-passenger boat where passengers pay per head. The expressions appear to derive from the service sector (example: the restaurant expression ‘party of four’). But there can be little doubt of linkage to a ‘let the good times roll’ mentality. While this can provide an obvious marketing benefit, there is also a backlash working against credibility that the connotation brings. As one charter fisher from Texas – Galveston area states: ‘We have no wish to be associated with the party animals, the pirates or the weekend warriors.’

‘Weekend Warrior’ is a phrase used by charter fishers to negatively describe those fishers who dabble in the business and steal clientele away from other bona fide fishers (those who make their living at it). ‘Meat killers’ also negatively describes

either clients or other fishers who evade regulations or who do not subscribe to the notion of conservation. 'Pirates' is a reference to private boat owners operating illegal charters. As a Mississippi respondent comments, '...pirates and weekend warriors steal business and are not interested in making a profit.' And in Louisiana, another says he resents '...weekend warriors who steal business...(they) have limited capability and experience, give chartering a bad name... (they) have no pride in operation.' Yet another charter operator from Mississippi speaks to the issue of legitimate operation:

We have a few renegades, but they're few – I would say less than five to eight percent... (Interviewer: By renegade, what do you mean?) They don't have an identifiable charter business...they charter with friends and relatives or whatever they call them. They don't hold a captain's license, or they don't have the random drug...they're outlaw charters. (Interviewer: Can you take steps to remedy that?) Yes...we call...we notify. 'You either get professional or get out.'

Even though these and other terms are used derogatorily by fishers to separate out the bad apples, the difficulty in maintaining a separation of legitimacy, so as not to be painted with the same brush remains a political agenda within the industry.

The frequent mention of skill is another dimension in which 'legit' operators distinguish themselves from interlopers – skill in knowing the waters and surrounding geography; having a 'trained eye' for spotting minute changes in the physical surroundings and being able to make accurate decisions based on those minute changes; and being savvy about good fishing spots. Many fishers feel that this is an area that has undergone change as a result of technological evolution in electronic equipment. This same theme is noted by Allison, Jacobs and Porter (1989), 'pre-Loran fishermen needed a trained eye. 'You fished an edge with visual ranges,' Jones recalls. 'Yonder rock lined up with yonder mountain peak.' When a certain rock lined up with a certain tree, it was time to change course because the edge was moving in another direction...[*The Fishermen's News* 1980, 36(20):32]' (Allison, Jacobs and Porter 1989:xxx).

An Alabama respondent in my study captured the evolutionary concept this way:

When fishing first started it was with the trolling boats. They didn't even bottom fish, they trolled up the beach for Spanish and King...Snapper sometimes...Ling. Then it got to where some of them were building the fishery; they started bottom fishing...it was before they had LORAN, so they had to get land ranges – couldn't fish outside (out of sight of) land 'cause there was no way to find anything. [...] (Now) any Joe Blow off the street can go and put it (LORAN/GPS) on a boat and find a reef and bore it.

Toward a Typology

From one hundred and five cases, I had information on how operations were structured, demographics and lifestyle data. I also had substantial information on per-

sonal motivations of operators, their personality style and how they used this style in the *doing* (the practice) of fishing. I adopted a kind of devil's advocate role in that I went back to the data to see if there was any evidence to support low credibility associated with perceptions, which could possibly invalidate the worth of their occupation.

Using my own perception of the *wave cowboy* as one possible type, I found two others in the descriptions of *weekend warriors* and *traditional fisher* that came from operators themselves. I found a fourth type in operators in the 'for hire' business for purely investment purposes. This was the *investor* and it was less common. Most cases easily fell into the four types, however there were exceptions. Often these were larger operations that had characteristics of more than one type by virtue of owner/operator separation or transition from one type to another. This type was called *hybrid*. The criteria used in grouping these cases came from the data itself, and involved grouping trends in characteristics and behaviour in the doing of fishing. *Ideal* types were constructed from recurring trend characteristics. Each charter operation case was reviewed within the framework of these ideal types. Table 1 illustrates the criteria and trends from which the types were developed.

Table 1. *Expected Characteristics of Ideal Types of Charter Fishers by Criteria.*

Criteria / type	<i>Weekend warrior</i>	<i>Wave cowboy</i>	<i>Investor</i>	<i>Traditional</i>
Tenure in chartering	short term < 5 yrs	variable*	variable*	long term, > 8 yrs
Motivation	lifestyle, pays for own fishing trips	lifestyle, freedom, be own boss	profit	way of life, family history in fishing
Multi-generation	no	variable*	no	yes
Previous occupation	yes	yes	yes	no
% Income from chartering	25% or less	40% or more	variable*	60-100% incl. related bus
Other occupation / source of income	yes	yes	yes	no
Commercial fishing	no	yes	no	yes
Issues important to charter fishers	closures, regulations	regulations, enforcement	closures, regulation	sustain resource / way of life, mgmt
Vessel	variable*	basic, older, smaller	luxurious and/or large	well equipped, medium/large
Education level	high school+	high school	university	high school
Size/type operation	1 boat part time simple operation	1 boat full time simple operation	1+ boats full time simple operation	1+ boats full time complex operation
Female family work in business	no	no	no	yes

* The term 'variable' was used where there was no particular expectation regarding the criteria.

Traditional operators designated themselves as full time in the business. Many had multi-generational tenure in the ‘for hire’ business and/or a family history of commercial fishing or shrimping. An encompassing knowledge of all fisheries was present in all cases, as well as a concern for the sustainability of the resource and their ‘way of life’. While many operators had pictures of ‘the catch’ on display, *traditional* operators on several occasions brought out scrapbooks and memorabilia to share with me. One such operator in Alabama reached down into a drawer during our conversation, and brought out a scrapbook many years old. Yellowed newspaper clippings, pictures of clients, and pictures of previous boats unfolded as he lovingly and with great care, turned the pages. His wife pointed to dusty posters and mementoes on the office walls and told me, in lowered tone, of their trip with a former governor and of the damage that Hurricane Frederick did to the area a few years ago. Family involvement was high among *traditionals*, and the trend of women working in the business (32 out of 56 cases), was more prevalent as well.

In the *traditional* category, over sixty percent of household income was derived from the ‘for hire’ operation. In several cases, this income was augmented by directly related businesses. Examples of this were booking services, bait shops, small marinas, marine engine repair, marine refinishing, and promotional items. Many also engaged in commercial fishing. Several cases had multiple boats and there was less variation in this category in terms of vessel amenities. Usually vessels were comfortably appointed but not luxurious. Most were well-maintained, well-equipped boats, but not necessarily newer. *Traditionals* showed high levels of activity in fishing organizations and in lobbying efforts. Of one hundred and five cases, fifty-three percent fell into this category (see Table 2 and Figure 1).

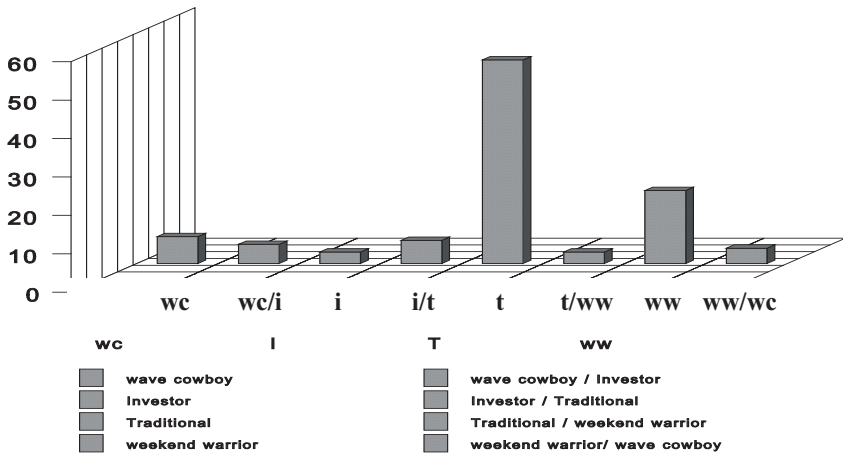
Weekend warriors derived less than twenty-five percent of their income from their ‘for hire’ business. Many designated themselves as part time operators, but for those that designated themselves as full time, the number of trips per annum was lower than that of other full time operators. The larger percentage of their income came from businesses, investments and/or pensions unrelated to fishing. Their motivation for being a ‘for hire’ operator was to use the business as a tax write-off and/or to pay for their own fishing expenses and boat ownership. Tenure as an operator was generally short term, one to five years. This category included a few operators who were just getting started in the charter business. Vessel characteristics polarized from well appointed and luxurious, to smaller vessels with few amenities. Membership in local fishing organizations was usually associated with networking opportunities, lower insurance rates, free drug testing and fishing regulation updates. Family involvement in charter fishing was almost non-existent. Of the one hundred and five cases, nineteen percent fell into this category.

Wave cowboys made their living (or at least most of their earnings) as an operator, with most designating themselves full time. There were a few who designated themselves as part time, but this was related to their perception of not having enough trips to fully support themselves by the business, or the seasonality of the business. In these cases, odd jobs augmented their incomes; some commercial fished. *Wave cowboys* expressed motivations of ‘being their own boss’, ‘being free’, ‘doing their own thing’, ‘not tied down’ as reasons for being an operator. An element of risk taking that included operating in inclement weather, operating alone offshore in very small boats, or operating with no insurance, was present in all cases. But it was

Table 2. *Distribution of Fisher Cases by Type.*

Charter/Party Fisher Type	Number of Cases
wave cowboy	7
wave cowboy / investor	5
investor	3
investor / traditional	7
traditional	56
traditional / weekend warrior	3
weekend warrior	20
weekend warrior / wave cowboy	4
Total cases:	105

Figure 1. *Percentage Offshore Charter and Party Boat Cases by Type.*



not so much the risk factor that was of import, but rather the macho way in which these fishers expressed it, as if bragging. They tended to link their masculinity to the hazards they encountered as boat operators. Terminology like ‘babes’, ‘bread’, ‘booze’, ‘the wife’, ‘feds’ frequented their conversational style. Their appearance often displayed a rough charm. A *wave cowboy* out of Alabama, cross bones flying high, filled the dock with his blustery, maverick personality. Surrounded by dock groupies, he made great display of calling home on his cell phone, smoothly dodging an apparent issue over his tardiness, while at the same time schmoozing the dock groupies and trying to get one of his marina buddies to relieve him of a double booking. He spoke of himself and others like him as a ‘rebel’, and ‘crazy *\$#*@*#!’. Wave Cowboys usually had boats that were older and more Spartan. There was evidence that some lived or stayed on their boats. There was generally no evidence of family involvement in the charter business, but most had been around fishing all their lives often starting out as deck hands. Many were not members of local fishing organiza-

tions, although socialization for referrals was in evidence. A *wave cowboy* in Texas (Galveston area), told me that he was the vice-president of a marina association that pooled resources for advertising and socialized together. Pointing to a boat across the dock, he informed me that the owner/operator (a respondent also categorized as a *wave cowboy*), was the president of their association. On interviewing the other respondent, I learned that the association was formed so that they could write off their socializing expenses. This respondent added that his friend's father had paid for the boat on the other side of the dock, apparently as a last resort toward gainful employment for his son! Seven percent of all cases fell into the category of *wave cowboy*.

Investors were generally not operators, although one held a captain's license. They were most often absent owners, involved in other businesses unrelated to the 'for hire' operation, or where the operation was an added attraction. The distinguishing factor in these cases, was that owners had the 'for hire' operation for investment purposes only. Further, captains and crew were also not dependent on the business. The income and vessel financial data were not made available. Captains were hired to operate the vessels and /or manage the business and were usually known to the owners. These were generally full time operations with captains who were captaining as a retirement option, or who perhaps had investment/business income as well but flexible time. In one case the owner kept a list of licensed captains who worked in area on crew boats (used to supply offshore oil rigs). Some owners used the boat for their own fishing excursions, and corporate entertainment ancillary to their major business. The vessels, with one exception, were luxuriously appointed and outfitted with full regalia of 'high tech' equipment and fishing gear. The one exception was alternately used as a dive boat. There was no trace family involvement related to the owners. Membership in local fishing organizations was rare, however if a hired captain belonged, they cited regulation updates and marketing opportunities as reasons for membership. Of the one hundred and five cases, only three percent fell into this category.

Another nineteen percent were combinations of the four types. The *investor / traditional* combination comprised seven percent, and occurred in situations of larger charter/party boat operations, where a full staff compliment was in place. These were usually stable operations, with captain and crew tenure of over eight years. While ownership was for investment purposes and the owner may have bought into the business, the staff compliment (of managers, captains, crew and administration) displayed strong traditional links. The *investor / wave cowboy* combination comprised five percent of cases, and occurred where absent owners hired an inexperienced captain who wanted 'the life' without investment, or in one case, a captain that had a history of capriciousness. The usual circumstance was a single luxury boat used for corporate purposes and enough chartering to qualify it as a full time operation.

The *wave cowboy / weekend warrior* and *weekend warrior / traditional* combinations were rare, comprising four percent and three percent of cases respectively. The *wave cowboy / weekend warrior* hybrids were owner/operators who displayed characteristics evenly distributed over the two categories. That is, they displayed *wave cowboy behaviors* on a weekend schedule and relied on a regular job the rest of the time. The *weekend warrior / traditional* combination occurred with owner/

operators who were well into transition from the first category to a traditional operation. Some of these included operators who were newer entrants into the business and who were building a clientele and reputation. There was a long-range plan that included establishing credibility and working toward at time when they could leave current employment situations to charter full time.

Why Are Types Important?

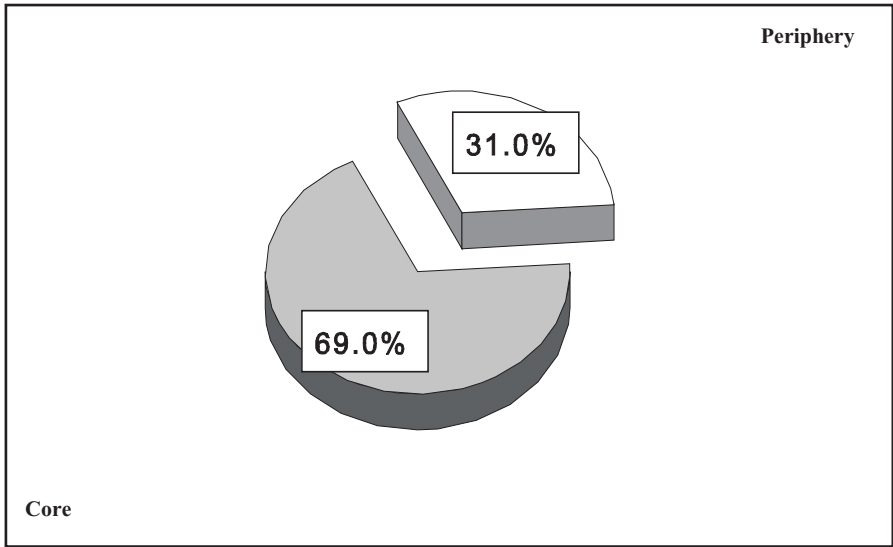
If the perception exists that charter and party boat operators are a capricious group, then it is important to establish if in fact characteristics that may contribute to this perception exist, and to what extent they might exist. While there is no evidence of capriciousness in any of the party boat operations, it is evident from this research that certain charter fishers possess characteristics that might contribute to the perception of them as capricious. This perception in turn, might cause the entire group to be trivialized. But it is vital to note that these particular charter operators form a small percentage overall. The development of a typology therefore, is a useful tool with which to understand the meaning of differentiation among offshore charter and party boat operators.

Those operators that possess strong ties to a culture of traditional fishing far outnumber those that might be considered capricious. While both *wave cowboys* and *traditional* operators describe an autonomous self as ‘strong-willed...strong-minded...able to survive in the business...be a self starter’ and ‘in control...have some authority...having freedom to work’, also common among *traditional* and *hybrid traditional* operators specifically, are phrases such as ‘we’re all family and friends’, ‘work together’, ‘(we) fish as brothers’, ‘everybody gathers to tell what’s happened the day before or the gossip’, illustrate that autonomy is enjoyed within a cultural community of fishers. *Traditional* operators and some *wave cowboys* have a family history of both commercial and charter fishing. They share resource management concerns of enforcement disparities, a sustainable resource, and their way of life. Many *traditional* operators have a life history experienced in the fisheries, and all are dependent on making a living from the fisheries. They have no readily available occupational alternatives.

The *wave cowboys* possess some characteristics that might cause them to be considered capricious, but to assume that this impacts on whether or not their occupation is negotiable is a stretch. They might appear to be the most marginal of operators, in that they generally have economically marginal operations. However, if economic marginality is a consideration for whether or not an occupation has validity, many occupations then fall under scrutiny of perhaps being unnecessary. *Wave cowboys* ‘do fishing’ their own way and in their own style. But this cannot reasonably place them at the periphery of charter and party boat operations. More important than their differentiation from *traditional* operations are their similarly linked economic ties and commitment to fishing as their life’s work.

Of all the cases studied, the only ones who don’t have to fish to make a living, would be the weekend warriors and investors, as both have other primary occupations. Combined with investor/ *wave cowboy* and *wave cowboy* / weekend warrior hybrids, they cumulatively represent thirty-one percent of the one hundred and five

Figure 2. Percentage Core and Periphery Offshore Charter and Party Boat Operators.



cases studied. Only these types of operators are not dependent on the fishery to make a living. Because of this, these operations are considered to be on the periphery of the charter and party boat fishing industry. By comparison, the traditional, the wave cowboy, the weekend warrior/ traditional, and the investor/traditional operations are each dependent on the fishery for livelihood. Combined, they represent the core of the charter and party boat fishing industry at sixty-nine percent of the one hundred and five cases studied. See Figure 2.

A Way of Life

‘(Charter fishing) is their life – there isn’t anything else they’d want to do’, says a wife, mother and business partner of her Texas fishing family. Certainly making a living informs the commitment that is evidenced in ‘core’ operators. But as the statement above indicates, being ‘for hire’ is also about a way of life. According to Sutton *et al.* (1999), thirty-four percent of ninety-six charter operators indicate they entered the business because ‘they enjoy fishing’, while twenty-eight indicate ‘preferred lifestyle as their reason. Party boat results show that forty-three percent (out of twenty-one operators), indicate ‘they enjoy fishing’, and the rest are evenly distributed across other category options such as ‘family ties’, ‘for the money’ and ‘preferred lifestyle’. Within my entire sample, sixty-five percent specifically indicate the importance of such things as autonomy, freedom, connection to other charter operators and flexibility in lifestyle.⁶ This figure increases to eighty-five percent among core charter operations.

A way of life can be understood as being the result of establishing a culture of work to sustain life. In his study of longshoremen, Pilcher (1972) recognizes this embeddedness of work and the work culture in definitions of identity. Bridging issues of gender, this is also a major theme in the Allison *et al.* (1989) study of women

commercial fishers in Alaska and their self-naming as ‘fishermen’. In the choosing of a work culture that one perceives as closely intertwined with one’s identity, there are many possible rationales. Fields (1997) lists ‘freedom’, ‘controlling your own life’ and ‘making your own decisions’ as reasons given by fishermen of the Alaskan commercial fisheries. Pilcher’s longshoremen speak of ‘freedom and independence’. These commonly worded rationales may have different applied meanings within different cultures of work and to a person’s identity or *being* within their culture of work. Take for instance, the rationale of freedom. A crucial freedom application with Pilcher’s longshoremen, is being able to control their leisure time. Quotes from charter fishers in this study show that for some, freedom means being able to be a ‘loner’, or a ‘rebel’ or a ‘crazy *\$*#*# !!’. For others, it means being able to sustain a cultural tradition – ‘what our family’s always done’. But whatever it might mean in application to different charter or party boat operators, commercial fishers, longshoremen and the like, the common characteristic is one that *enables* or gives people the feeling of *being able* to live their identity in their work culture. This enabling characteristic heavily weights the commitment that charter and party boat operators have to their work culture. It might be said then, that operators look to their work culture not only as a means of subsistence, but as the life-activity of their being.

Summary and Conclusion

Early in this paper I described perceptions that may be held to varying degrees, of commercial fishers and recreational fishing providers. There are differences in these perceptions, just as there are differences in regulatory definitions of commercial fishing and recreational fishing. Because of these differences, it is all too easy to disregard the importance of the ‘for hire’ recreational fishing industry. Their relatively small numbers as compared to commercial fishing participants, the fact that they are awkwardly grouped with inshore and inland anglers, and the fact that they must adhere to an complicated and ever-changing array of federal and state regulations, places this group of operators at a decided disadvantage. Their self-naming as the ‘red-headed stepchild’ seems apt.

The findings presented in this paper clearly show that many of the perceptions held of charter and party boat operators are erroneous, or at the very least, unsound. It is through the typology of charter and party boat operators, that we get a clearer picture on the significance and legitimacy of their claims to the fisheries resource. Only thirty-one percent of operations are in what I have termed the *periphery*, meaning that these operations are not dependent on the fishery for their livelihood or way of life. Care must be taken not to trivialize or regulate to extinction the sixty-nine percent of ‘for hire’ operators who have invested their lives in and are dependent on the U.S. Gulf of Mexico fishery.

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Notes

¹ For a detailed history of commercial fishing protectionism see Fulton (1976[1911]).

² It is recognized that an argument might be made that operators engaged in providing recreational activities are themselves enjoying certain benefits of this activity. Based on responses from operators, there can be no denying that this is so. However, from their representations, providing recreational activity for others is work, not recreation. It does not occur during the leisure time of operators.

³ Magnuson-Stevens Act (1996), USC Title 16, Chapter 38, Section 1801. Revisions current to September 1997. USC (United States Code). www.fws.gov/laws/digest/reslaws/fishcon.html

⁴ 'Passenger for hire' is further defined in section 2101 (21a) of USC title 46.

⁵ See Hamilton (1998). In Hawaii, 'the catch' is not *assumed* to belong to the charter clients, but rather are in fact the property of the captain. Various rules of allocation exist in dividing up the catch, but '... retaining whole large fish to sell was a priority for many vessel operators' (ibid.:12). Charter costs reflect the value of the fish as the property of the captain.

⁶ Steinmetz and Wright (1989) describe the notion of 'being one's own boss' as 'a deeply held ideal in American culture'.

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