

Northeast Distant Fishery Sea Turtle Bycatch Reduction Project

Profile: The Fishing Vessel Seneca

FACT SHEET

The Seneca is one of thirteen pelagic longline swordfishing vessels working to find solutions to accidental entanglement of endangered turtles while fishing on the Grand Banks off Newfoundland.

Originally built in 1971 as a Florida shrimp boat, the Seneca's owner calls her a "plucky looking boat, kind of hunkered down." She's 78'10" of aluminum, with the original engine still intact, and can carry a captain and up to eight crewmen for four-week journeys to the Grand Banks chasing swordfish.

Owners of the Seneca since 1990, Gail and Charlie Johnson of Harpswell, Maine, and their children are one of America's long-time fishing families. Charlie is considered "an old-timer" in the Atlantic longline fleet. He started fishing as a lobsterman, but was attacked by "Blue Water Fever" in 1974, when he bought a small longline vessel and started chasing swordfish. Though fishing is one of the most dangerous jobs in the world, Charlie intends to keep going until he can't physically fish anymore. Like most fishermen, he loves the sea faring way of life and says he can't imagine doing anything else.

Gail's job as shore captain is to take care of all the behind-the-scenes issues that keep the family business running, such as finding bait, ordering supplies, trip financial settlements, handling issues for the crew once ashore, and taking care of everything Charlie can't do while he is at sea. She fills in as first mate when the Seneca steams to her winter fishing grounds off South America.

Inspired by their parents' love of the ocean, son Chip became a Maine lobsterman, and daughter April is studying to become a NOAA Fisheries observer.

Gail and Charlie have been impacted by tighter regulations and rising operating costs throughout the 1990s and into the new century. When swordfish populations declined to low levels, the U.S. fleet was called upon to make sacrifices in catches so the U.S. could meet its international obligation to rebuild the stock. In 2001, their vessel, along with the entire U.S. Atlantic longline fleet, was prohibited from fishing in their primary swordfish grounds on the Grand Banks of Newfoundland because of encounters between fishing gear and endangered sea turtles. However, fleets from other countries remained in the Grand Banks, leaving the Johnsons wondering what they could do to save their fishery.

Faced with adversity and an uncertain future, the Johnsons did what most hard-core fishermen do in the face of challenge: they persevered...and their efforts are paying off.



Gail and Charlie are not newcomers to the world of government regulation. Recognizing their opportunity to have an impact through the public fisheries management process, they have worked with government regulators since the early 1980s, representing the interests of the Atlantic longline fleet. One of their goals has been to make sure fishery managers and scientists understood how the fishery operated so that social and economic impacts of regulations could be properly assessed.

Another goal has been to let people know that swordfishermen are environmentalists who believe conservation is the key to their future, as evidenced by this fishery's efforts to spearhead the successful rebuilding of North Atlantic swordfish in record time. Gail says that the American longline fleet just wants a level playing field internationally so American fishermen are not alone in making these necessary sacrifices.

During the years, Charlie has taken observers out on his vessel, and has worked with NOAA Fisheries to help develop better data collection and data management for the pelagic longline fishery. Gail has served on the Boards of the Maine Fishermen's Cooperative Association and the Maine Fishermen's Forum, and was one of the early members on the New England Fishery Management Council in the 1980s. She served in the 1980s and '90s on the advisory committee for the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas, and was a founding member and officer of the Maine Fishermen's Wives Association, a member of the Associated Fisheries of Maine, and a founding Director and officer of both the Blue Water Fishermen's Association and the Fisheries Research Institute.

If Charlie and Gail can help develop and learn new and better ways to keep the pelagic longline fishery viable while avoiding unwanted bycatch, every fisherman can. They were among the first in line when Blue Water Fishermen's Association solicited interest in conducting research with NOAA Fisheries to find sea turtle avoidance methods and to develop gear to help fishermen dehook and disentangle turtles that cannot be avoided.

Charlie and Gail are finding the balance between ensuring a viable future for the pelagic longline industry and a future for sea turtles. Their contributions to America's fishing heritage will continue long after the Seneca sails her last voyage into the open sea.