

The Life

Men and women describe the life of commercial fishing

We are pleased to present an opportunity for those involved in commercial fishing to describe the way they work, the way they live. If you have a story to tell, send it to editor@pacificfishing.com.



Caleb Thorsen and Walker Eliassen struggle with the cod end.

Hake

It never changes: The smell of diesel and dead fish

Story and photos by Patrick S. Dixon

Patrick Dixon has an entirely sane shore job, so why he keeps coming back to fishing remains a mystery. He's a photographic instructor at South Puget Sound Community College in Olympia, Wash., with 25 years teaching experience in darkroom, traditional, and digitally manipulated photography. Patrick also teaches at Centralia High School, in Centralia, Wash., and has taught at The Evergreen State College in Olympia, the University of Alaska Kenai campus, Kenai Central High School in Alaska, and at workshops in Alaska and the Lower 48. To see more work by Patrick S. Dixon, go to www.DixonMarinePhotography.com.

It's been 10 years since I sold my boat and permit. I still miss the water. I miss the calm mornings of slow awakenings anchored in a glassy bay after a fishing day. I miss cooking on the boat, throwing together an improvisation of salmon, garlic, onions, and potatoes. I miss running out of the river full of adrenaline and excitement, and I miss the days of running back in, tired and satisfied, with a boat full of fish. I miss standing on deck and inhaling the salt air. These are the memories that stick with me.

During the summer of 2005, hoping to capture some of those old feelings, I re-introduced myself to the realities

of fishing for a living. In early July, I made arrangements to jump aboard an 82-foot dragger out of Warrenton, Ore., near Astoria, to go hake fishing. Rob Seitz, my last deckhand, has skippered the *George Allen* for the past four years. He and one of his crew, 25-year-old Caleb Thorsen, have been catching hake for nearly two months. They've tried several third deckhands who didn't fit well. Walker Eliassen, 19, signed on two weeks before I show up. By the time I climb on board, the three of them are already working together easily and efficiently.

I come loaded with camera gear, a video camera, my survival suit, and a healthy dose of excitement. Not everyone gets to do this, and Rob was generous enough to call me when he realized they were having an exceptional season. By the time I arrive, they have been filling the boat daily for nearly two months, putting up over 2 million pounds of hake.

Hake, or Pacific whiting, is a pelagic species closely related to cod. With an average length of 15 inches during this time of year and weighing 2–3 pounds apiece, they are strong swimmers and feed on crustaceans and small fish.

I stow my gear on the bunk and join Rob in the cabin with my camera as we cut loose from the dock. It's 10 p.m., and we head out the Skipanon River toward the mouth of the Columbia.



Rob Seitz

I had pulled into the driveway at Rob's house near the beach a few hours earlier to find the wind gusting hard. The first question Rob's wife, Tiffany, asked me was, "Are you sure you want to do this, Pat?" I said, "Sure, why?" She nodded toward the trees bending in the wind, then looked at me. "Well, do you get seasick? It's blowing pretty good." I replied that I probably had no sea legs at all after being away from boats and big water for so long. But that I'd decide once I talked to Rob, and if I didn't go this time, I'd go some other.

When Rob showed up for dinner after taking on fuel and ice, he said the weather was supposed to be the same for a week, so I might as well tough it out. I figured I was going to be sick even if it was flat calm. So, a few hours later, after a nice, greasy barbeque rib dinner (a fact Rob pointed out with a chuckle), I was primed, and we were on our way out with the tide.

It's dark before we get to the Columbia River bar, and I visit with Rob and snap a few grainy night shots, then crawl into the bunk to ride out the trip to the grounds. The weather pattern has been the same since the high pressure rolled in a week or so ago. As Rob puts it, "When it's nice in Portland, it's rough out here." He means the warm air on shore rises, creating a vacuum that sucks in cooler air over the ocean. The northwest wind calms down overnight as the land temperatures cool, and the mornings get calm. The wind picks up in the afternoon, and the seas build again every day like clockwork.

We run past the bar. The ride in the bunk gets a little rolly, and though I'd like to see what's going on, I know it's dark, and I'm beginning to feel queasy and uncomfortable enough to not want to move. We're 13 miles offshore before Rob shuts the main engine down around midnight. By then I've learned — again — that "a decent night's sleep" means one thing to a fisherman and quite another to a landlubber like I've become. I position my body so I'm comfortable enough to doze and at the same time be braced against rolling out of the bunk with the swell. When I'm prone, I don't feel as sick, though there are a few sensations that make me think my stomach is trying to leave my body through any orifice possible. I try not to think about those barbequed ribs. I force myself to think of other things.

I think about the dinner conversation with Rob and Tiffany. They were both upset at the recent political developments in the drag fishery. They've recently seen a film by Greenfire Productions called *Common Ground*

that purports to show the devastation that bottom-trawling gear causes on the bottom of the sea. But instead of using footage of Pacific draggers working the mud bottoms off Oregon, Washington, and California with nets that roll across the bottom, they used footage of East Coast scallop dredgers digging up the floor of the Atlantic and leaving destruction in their wake. The impression is that these methods are used on the West Coast by all draggers. According to Rob and Tiffany, the film was misleading at best, an attack on their livelihood at the worst. It was shown recently in Astoria, and the only attendees who raised questions about its veracity were the fishermen who stand to lose fishing grounds if the film is believed by politicians.

I awaken from a fitful doze to the sound of the main engine firing up. Rob is up at 4:30, and I roll around in the bunk thanking the sea gods for a smoother ride as he heads south with the swell. Sometime after dawn, I become aware of a bustle of activity in the cabin. Rob's face appears around the door. "Hey, Pat. We're gonna try one here in a few."

He disappears again, not waiting for an answer. I pull on my jeans and boots, dig my camera out of its backpack, and scramble up the steps to the wheelhouse. Caleb and Walker are already on the back deck. Rob looks at me and says, "We're running back north to get into position for a tow. I've been seeing fish on the machine." He slows the boat and rummages under the dash to gather a wired remote controller and what looks like a hundred feet of thin gray cable to control the throttle and steering from the back deck. He laces the wire down the passageway to the stern and out the door, where he wedges it near the hydraulic controls by the reel that holds the net.



F/V Seeker, another hake vessel.

The net on a dragger is a jumble of assorted cables, lines, and heavy mesh. It looks to the untrained eye like a giant bag, but it's more like a giant webbed funnel. The end that hits the water first is the smallest, and is closed, keeping any fish that enter from escaping. As the net then peels off the reel, the mesh grows in size and the bag becomes wider. Some 150 feet later at the mouth of the webbing, a platform of sensors called the head rope sounder is attached to the net and turned on so it can signal a unit in the wheelhouse during the tow that the bag is full of fish.

I photograph until I run out of digital film. I return to my bunk and am grabbing my gear when suddenly I am overwhelmed by nausea. Luckily the head is unoccupied, and everyone else is busy. I empty my stomach as painlessly as I can remember ever doing so — thanks to the ribs, I think. And though the taste in my mouth is terrible, I wipe my eyes and think I have to eat something right away, or the next bout will be worse. I grab a bottled water out of the fridge and some Wheat Thins out of my food bag. Wobbly from the exertion, I sit down at the table in the galley and nibble while I transfer the data from the camera card to a portable hard drive. I watch the monitor, hoping it won't take too long so I can get back out on deck in the fresh air. I remember that someone once told me being seasick was as close as they had ever come to wanting to die. I don't feel that bad...yet.

Once the photos are transferred, I erase the card and go outside. The net is in the water, and the crew is negotiating a series of lines and cables that snake their way aft down the chute, off the boat into the depths, and they pull this unbelievably complex array of equipment through the water properly. The lines end with a heavy rode of chain, and the crew shackles even larger links of chain on to them for weight to pull the mouth of the net downward, opening it as wide as possible. The chain gives way to steel cables, and finally Caleb and Walker

unhook and winch “doors” away from where they hang on either side of the gantry at the very stern of the boat. The doors are heavy rectangular pieces of steel approximately 6 feet high and 4 feet wide. Though they do resemble doors, they act more like airplane wings in the water, pulling the mouth of the net apart, thereby creating the widest possible opening to scoop up fish.

After all of this is in the water, Rob bolts back to the cabin where he can see the net on his sonar and depth finder. He steers the boat, watches the sonars, and coils and stows the remote cable at the same time. Meanwhile, Caleb and Walker use hydraulic winches to port and starboard to lower the gear to the correct depth while Rob instructs them over the deck speaker from the wheelhouse. He grabs a microphone and quickly commands, “Yeah, take ’em down to 50 fathoms.” I watch as he points to the depth finder. “This is the net,” he says, “and these are the fish. We’re still too shallow. See there?” He points to the sonar, which shows a blob of yellow and



Pacific whiting, aka hake

Walker come in the cabin and begin making pancakes and bacon. The idea of something in my stomach besides crackers is appealing, but I can’t seem to muster the strength to crawl out of the bunk until breakfast is over. Fortunately, they saved me a plate in the oven, and I am relieved to discover the bacon has dried out. It turns to paste in my mouth, but I do my best to finish it before heading out to photograph my first drag net full of hake.

Besides the impressive size of the haul — 45 tons of fish in one tow — I am awed at the amount of effort and hard work of the skipper and crew. Rob is on the back deck with the guys as they do their specific jobs getting the gear on board. Rob runs the hydraulics, and once the doors are back on board and secure, he starts winching the net onboard. The steel cables misbehave, and without a level-wind all three of the crew fight to get them to wrap the reel evenly. They push them and pull them, unwind and wind them again and again onto the reel, and eventually wrap them to Rob’s liking.

The entire process of setting the net is reversed. The chains come on board, and the heavy links are removed. The lighter chains are wrapped on the reel in their turn, followed by heavy lines that must be untwisted as they come aboard. The mouth of the net comes out of the water next with its large meshes that steer the fish into the bag but don’t themselves catch anything. The head rope sounder — the weighted raft that holds the sensors — is removed, turned off, and set aside, and finally we start seeing hake heads poking through the tighter mesh of the outer part of the bag. I photograph them as they come aboard, not seeing what is coming out of the water. Behind us a 150-foot long, five-foot high sausage of hake has surfaced. On board, the bag is literally stuffed with fish. “Pretty impressive, huh?” says Rob as I gawk and photograph the biggest load of fish I have ever seen. I can only reply, “Very.”

red going underneath two longer bands of color. “They should go between these bands, not below them like that. They got under us.” He picks up the microphone, and I can hear his voice next to me and behind me at the same time. “Give it another 25.” And we watch the result on the machines. The long bands of color lower, and the next blob approaches directly between them. “There,” he says. “See that?”

“Now we’re catching fish,” I reply, amazed. “It’s like a slow video game.” He nods.

Feeling a little raw, I decide the best place for me is a prone position. With apologies and a short explanation about where I had disappeared to earlier, I head to the bunk. With the gear in the water and the boat towing with the swell, I have a brief respite from all the roller-coaster sensations my stomach seemed to have picked up loud and clear. I hear Caleb and

“It’s amazing anyone thought this up,” says Rob as Caleb and Walker open the hatch covers to the fish hold. I realize that from the start to the finish, he’s right. Though he was just speaking of the tow itself, I was thinking of the entire enterprise: from finding the fish on sonar, to catching them with a battery of electronics, to using an array of hydraulics and manpower to manipulate reels and winches on the rigging, to finally pulling the net aboard. It’s an enormous effort and a singularly impressive enterprise.

Rob and the crew work the lines and hydraulics like magicians, while I photograph and videotape. The net is pulled aboard and sections of it that are laced together with smaller ropes are “unzipped” to create holes in the bottom of the bag that allow thousands of pounds of hake to slide free right above the open hatches to the hold. A hydraulically powered hook is attached to a strap girdling the net, and with a mechanical whine of the motor above us, more of the giant bag is hauled aboard. Once a section is empty, the hook is removed and reattached farther down the full net. As it is pulled forward to hang above the hatches, the empty web is wound onto the reel. This process repeats itself again and again with slight variations.

All three crew work hard to reconfigure the hydraulic lines so the last of the fish can be bounced out of a section. They then shovel the thousands of fish bodies that miss the hatches from the deck into the hold. It’s heavy work, with heavy equipment on a rolling boat in a building sea. The sun is out, and before long everyone is wet with a combination of sweat, salt water, and fish slime. One of the straps that encircle the bag at regular intervals pops a couple of strands as Rob yards it forward. He tells Caleb to be sure to replace it. Caleb nods and stows the information away. I’ll see a new strap being splined together in the cabin as I leave later that night. The second tow won’t use that strap. They’ve got so many fish on board from the first tow that the bag is tied off above it to create a smaller net. If they fill the net twice, they’ll overload the boat.



Hard work

Pulling the gear takes nearly 2 1/2 hours. Over halfway through, I once again run out of film, go into the cabin to retrieve my hard drive, and feel that old, familiar feeling. This time isn’t as easy as the first. This lasts longer and, as a result, the last few retches are on an empty stomach. Feeling weak (and finally like I do want to die), I clean up my mess and blow my nose. I collapse at the table in the galley and transfer the photos while sipping from another water bottle and eating some Oreos. Rob comes in and stops as he heads back to the wheelhouse, giving me a look. I shake my head. He just smiles grimly, nods, and heads up the steps. I slide to a prone position on the bench by the table, profoundly grateful he hadn’t offered me any advice.

I eventually drag myself back on deck with Walker and Caleb, photographing them as they get the net ready for the second tow. Caleb laces the smaller lines through the holes in the bag and ties them off, effectively recreating the zippers again. He and Walker repair the holes, tie off the net, and wind it back on the reel as Rob looks for a place to begin another tow. Rob is in the wheelhouse, running north to where one of the other boats in his group is finding fish. I join him there before heading to the bunk again. I ask him where we are, and he zooms the plotter out so I can see our position relative to the shoreline. We are about six miles south of the mouth of the Columbia River off the coast of Oregon, some 13 miles offshore. I ask about all the lines on the plotter, and

he shows me tows he has made, rock piles on the sea bed he has to avoid, restricted areas he's not allowed to fish, shipping lanes, and wrecks on the bottom. He's entered the names of the wrecks and rock piles himself, and has deleted many of his tows. "If I left them all on there," he says, "you wouldn't be able to see much else on the screen." It slowly dawns on me that this plotter is the equivalent of a log book. He can look at it and tell when a tow was made, even how he did. He tells me that, coupled with the traditional log he keeps, the plotter stores invaluable information about his catches.

It's only a few minutes more before he tries another tow. "I decided to not try and catch someone else's fish," he says, meaning he'd been heading north on a fish call, but as he ran he was seeing fish on his sonar. Rather than run over them and pass them up for radio fish, he decided to turn around and tow through the fish he was seeing under the boat. It was a good decision. The bag was full in less than two hours, and we agreed on the run in that the lesson about not chasing radio fish was one you had to learn over and over again.

I videotape the setting of the gear for the second tow rather than shooting stills. With 90,000 pounds of fish on board, the boat is lower in the water and doesn't bounce around as much as it did empty. Since I don't need to go inside for more film, I keep the contents of my stomach down and concentrate on the footage. The biggest obstacle I have to contend with is myself: I am caught between the fisherman part of me and the photographer. The photographer wants to grab the shot; the fisherman wants to be sure to stay out of the way and not make the crew's job harder. The fisherman wins more than the photographer. I find myself missing shots I should be taking because I am out of position while trying to avoid a cable here or someone's line of sight there.

The net goes into the water again, a slow, laborious process that gives me a chance to shoot scenes that repeat themselves over and over with only slight variations. Once the action subsides, my stomach realizes the sea has been building and reasserts itself. I head back to the bunk. Rob tows with the weather so he can make better speed, and the boat rises and falls heavily in the swell. He wakes me for the final pull at 4 p.m. The sea is angry under a blue sky and a steady northerly wind. Rob turns the boat into the weather before we pull, and the ride evens out a bit.

The bag on this tow is as plugged as the first. As the fish come on board, the stern of the George Allen rides low enough in the water to allow the occasional wave to race up the chute and smack the crew's legs as they work. Tasks like unhooking the head rope sounder from the lines become more tentative as attention is divided between unhooking the shackles and watching the chute for an incoming wave.

It doesn't feel like the situation is overly dangerous, but the deck is definitely wetter and more slippery. Walker struggles for a second to keep his balance as a foot of water races up the chute and catches him mid-calf. For a moment I wonder how many fish the boat can safely hold, but then I remember that Rob does this every day and, knowing him, I'm reassured.

Night finally arrives as we run in. In the bunk I listen to the engine drone and catch snippets of conversation between Rob and the other drag skippers. Thousands of miles apart, separated by years and an entirely different fishery, the talk is surprisingly similar. The concerns of fishermen still center around what the biologists and politicians decide. Will we get to fish tomorrow? Next week? What will be the policy next year?

Icome away convinced that draggers are like the loggers of the fishing industry, at least here in the Pacific Northwest. Government regulations and restrictions have slowly eaten away at the industry's ability to support many people; the work is hard, dirty, and extremely labor-intensive; and to get into the business requires a substantial investment in equipment that most people can't afford. For their efforts, Rob, Caleb, and Walker will gross nearly \$9,000 for the day. Out of that they will each get a percentage, and the rest will pay expenses such as food, fuel, insurance, repairs, and supplies. It's an ongoing battle that all fishermen-businessmen fight.

For the hake season, which lasts almost three months, Rob will see Tiffany and their children for literally minutes or hours at a time, between trips and taking on fuel and ice. Caleb will get a little more free time, but he'll be needed at the dock to help with repairs, straightening out the net, moving the boat, and a myriad of other jobs. Walker will take the third crew spot until he gets tired of it and decides to have a summer. Someone else will jump on in his place for a few trips until they've made some quick cash or screw up and get fired.

It's a revolving door on a moving vessel, traveling the sea, navigating change, and negotiating unpredictable political currents. From the bunk where I spend the bulk of a queasy day, I make a mental note: I haven't caught the scent of salt on the air since I've been on board, since I was on land, romanticizing about the sea. On a work boat like the *George Allen*, all I can smell is diesel and dead fish.