

*Ford, 47, disagrees that the sea is being depleted. One of his recent 14-hour runs yielded 1,000 pounds of gray sole (worth about \$3 a pound at auction), 300 pounds of monkfish, and some flounder. On his 52-foot fiberglass boat, Lisa Ann III, Ford typically steams out at midnight for a three-hour trip to Jeffreys Ledge with two crewmen on deck and a federal observer — a third-party ombudsman — to monitor overfishing.*

*This government watchman, a stranger with notepad and pen, asking intrusive questions — and sometimes getting seasick — has spoiled fishing excursions for Ford. The thrill of the hunt, the wild unpredictability of the wind and the waves has turned into a list of quotas, trip limits, and gear restrictions.*

*He hopes that “some day the marine fishery agencies will figure out there’s more cod and other fish in the ocean than they think there is now. The government doesn’t see what I see out there every day.” Still, burdensome fishing policies aside, Ford never fails to get excited when the catch sensor blinks, indicating that there’s plenty of fish in the net. “I love fishing. Otherwise, I’d put my anchor down and call it quits,” Ford said. He spoke with the Globe about why he remains hooked.*

“There are a lot of fish right now. I can fill my boat every day, year-round, no question. Gray sole and flounder used to come in seasonally, but now they’re here all season. And it’s actually the best year ever for dabs (a flatfish). Fish seem to be clustering in different areas than their usual spots. Haddock, for example, move during low pressure systems, so I usually head out before a storm to catch them.

“As a fisherman, I have a different view of fish populations than regulators, and their catch quotas haven’t caught up with the real picture. In fact, the quotas set by the government are at an all-time low. Each fisherman only has a certain quota, and these are transferable, meaning they can be bought and sold. I’m fortunate that my operation has been growing because I’ve purchased other local fishermen’s quota[s] — a lot of them have quit or retired.

“I have 600,000 pounds of quota, but a majority of this is haddock, pollock, redfish, and yellowtail flounder — fish I can’t target because they’re usually intermingled with cod, which is very restricted. I own about 1.7 percent of Gulf of Maine haddock

quota, which I now lease out since we have to try not to catch cod. That's why my cod boat is now a flounder boat, although today I caught 2,500 pounds of skate instead.

“No matter how much I catch, if prices are low at the fish auction, the whole trip can be a deficit. Thirteen hundred pounds of fish at 30 cents a pound doesn't come out to much money, especially after boat and insurance payments, dockage, fuel, oil, towing wire, cable, nets, filters, maintenance, and repairs. And the nail in the coffin might be having to pay for the on-board federal observer since agencies are pushing to have fishermen like me pay to subsidize that program.

“Still, I'm out there, day in and day out, and I've been fishing since I was a kid. The long hours are difficult, but when I can find fish, it makes it all worthwhile. I'm driven to catch more fish than anyone else and I won't come back to shore until I've made a few drags with the net.

“And while many fisherman are superstitious, I like to defy luck. I even allow bananas and women on board — both are supposed to be bad luck for fishing boats. But you can eat bananas, and anyone is welcome on Lisa Ann.”