

# Getting policy right—why fisheries management is plagued by the panacea mindset

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Fisheries management has often been characterized by regulatory policies that result in panaceas—broad based policy solutions that are expected to address several problems, which result in unintended consequences. An international research team shows how one size fits all policies like individual transferable quotas may be doomed from the

onset, as these policies perpetuate "the panacea mindset." The team calls for a more customized policy approach in a new piece in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*.

Individual transferable quotas were first adopted in the 1970s by the Netherlands, Iceland and Canada and rose to popularity in the 1980s. Prior research reported in 2009 that 18 countries used ITQs, including Australia, Canada, Denmark, Iceland, the Netherlands, and New Zealand, to manage their marine fish stocks of nearly 250 species. Even though ITQs are intended to function as a fish management strategy, the researchers cite examples of how ITQs have backfired. In some countries, this fish quota system has: proved unsuccessful in preventing fish stock declines, inadvertently led to fish oligopolies and resulted in community upheaval, as fishing rights of indigenous and subsistence users have often been overlooked. For instance, in Kodiak, Alaska, ITQs undermined core cultural values of hard work, opportunity and fairness by increasing the power of a few boat owners over their crew and other community members. In Iceland, transferable quotas were used as collateral for loans and were a major contributor to the economic collapse of the country in the 2008 recession.

According to the research team, reliance on the simple formulaic policies or panaceas, such as the continued use of ITQs, may be explained by a collection of factors, which they label the panacea mindset. This mindset is based on conceptual narratives, power disconnects, and heuristics and biases, which may make one predisposed to embrace panaceas as a solution and may perpetuate the problem more broadly:

- To understand problems, people rely on conceptual narratives; however, such narratives are often based on an oversimplified notion of the problem, which make panaceas appealing and plausible. For example, one of the conceptual narratives driving

ITQs, especially among commercial fisheries, is that fisheries can be managed by a single-stock approach even though multiple species may exist. Despite literature underscoring the benefits of a multi-species approach, modifications to ITQs are rarely made.

- Given that there are typically winners and losers with policies, power disconnects occur, which create vested interests in panaceas by reinforcing inequities. With ITQs, fishers with more political and economic power than their counterparts are more likely to benefit from such a quota system and may even monopolize it; as a result, they also may become insulated from the costs associated with ITQs.
- Heuristics (the use of mental shortcuts often when dealing with complex information) and biases prevent people from accurately assessing panaceas. As a result, a sweeping solution that may lack context may be more likely to be adopted than rejected. Other cognitive factors and behaviors may also play a role here, which interfere with one's ability to evaluate the pros and cons of a possible solution. For example, prior research has found that people often are unable to adequately assess risk. With ITQs, the researchers point out how the future of fisheries in Alaska is often based on the inaccurate premise that there are only two scenarios: collapse versus rebuilding, when in fact there may be other options in between.

To combat the panacea mindset, the team proposes compiling resources about the given issue into a searchable online, institutional diagnostics toolkit. The toolkit could include best practices, links to related journal articles, checklists and other resources, which challenge people's biases and help them become more informed about [policy](#) options, as they develop specific policies for a given context.

"Oversimplified, broad based policies or panaceas are an institutional problem throughout our society. In spite of negative side effects or

outright failure, panaceas can be found in policies designed to address issues affecting the environment, healthcare, the economy and many other areas," said co-author DG Webster, an associate professor of environmental studies at Dartmouth College. "Exploring the panacea mindset is a first step toward explaining why panaceas are so entrenched in the human condition and what methods will be most effective at combating them. We cannot simply say, 'avoid panaceas,' as many have said before; we need to develop systems like the institutional diagnostic toolkit that make it easier for people to find solutions that accurately reflect the political, economic, social, cultural and environmental context," added Webster.

**More information:** Oran R. Young et al., "Moving beyond panaceas in fisheries governance," *PNAS* (2018).

[www.pnas.org/cgi/doi/10.1073/pnas.1716545115](http://www.pnas.org/cgi/doi/10.1073/pnas.1716545115)

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