

I never technically “won” the fishing game by getting 18 fish to feed my family for the month. Some might see this as a complete failure, at first I did as well, but now I don’t think so. All of the people that I saw “succeeding” by getting 18 fish ended up with an empty pond at the end of 10 days. Yes, they completely fed their families this month, but what about the next one? I never got 18 fish, but I always got at least 11, and I never ran out of fish in the pond*. I figured that my family could afford to live on a little less this month, for the sake of sustainability in the long run. Ideally, however, I wouldn’t have to pick. There should be a way to get 18 fish for all three fisherpeople’s families AND have fish left over in the pond. Sadly, I don’t think anyone in our class discovered this perfect method, or if they did succeed they did by accident or a random stroke of luck. I’d say we are a relatively intelligent class, and we should be able to succeed, but we ran into some of Meadows’ classic systems traps.

The first two traps that we ran into are inherently connected. They are policy resistance and the tragedy of the commons. In policy resistance, there are various different actors, (the three fishing boats), with different goals, (to feed their own individual families), pulling in different directions, (to catch more fish individually). These different goals contribute to the tragedy of the commons, when a shared resource is depleted because the successes of individuals are not shared, but the failures are. When one boat catches more fish, the other boats don’t reap that reward, but rather become more motivated to catch more fish for themselves. If everyone catches more fish, it is good in the short term, but that means that there are less fish in the pond, which lessens the reproduction rate, which leads to eventual depletion, and everyone loses. How quickly this happens depends on how greedy each of the individual fishing boats are, how hard they work for their individual successes, and how strongly they pull in their different directions to reach their different respective goals. These traps can be avoided through communication and reevaluation of goals. Though it is a little difficult to communicate with fake boats on a computer, they will mimic your own boat’s actions as to how much fish you catch. This eliminates the possibility of taking turns catching the most fish, say if one family got 18 one month and the next one the next month, but it is still possible to lower the amount of fish you catch in general. Still, in order to be motivated to lower your catch, you need to reevaluate your goals. If the goal is to feed your family with 18 or more fish this month, you would never willingly lessen your fish haul, but if your goal is to be able to feed your family consistently, if a little less, for the next 6 or 12 months, you would quickly lessen your catch for the sake of sustainability and maintaining fish in the pond. Since the game only lasts 10 days and you get to start over at the end of each round, it is easy to get caught up in the rather selfish, short term goal of catching as many fish as possible NOW. However, if you pretend that the game is real life, it is much more logical to reevaluate and go for long term success. There might be some months, if this were real life, where your family is particularly desperate and it is hard to think about the long term, but that is where communication and camaraderie with the other fishing boats kicks in.

A few other traps that we fell into while playing the fishing game were drift to low performance, escalation, and seeking the wrong goal. Drift to low performance was very easy for

me personally to fall victim to. After failing the first few rounds, my morale was very low, and it was easier to just randomly click rather than try to think it through, if I knew I was going to fail anyway. Once I reevaluated my goal and decided that for now, I would focus strictly on sustainability, I realized that I could succeed in that and my morale came back. If I had continued to focus on trying to have the best of both worlds, my morale may have remained low, but I would have had to hold myself to a higher standard and keep trying because if I succeeded, it would have been worth it in the long run. Another trap that I fell into in the beginning was escalation. I am a competitive person, so I wanted to catch the most fish. It greatly aggravated me when the orange boat took 4 fish, because that was beyond my abilities, so I kept taking more and more to try to guarantee that I had the most at the end. This quickly depleted the pond, and once I changed my goal to sustainability, I did not have this problem anymore. The best way to end a who-can-catch-the-most-fish race is to communicate, change your goals, or ideally not get into one in the first place. The last trap that I fell into I think ended up being the basis of many of my other traps. Once I stopped seeking the wrong goal and aimed for sustainability, everything went much more smoothly and I was able to succeed, at least for now in my book. Although I still believe it has to be possible to both maintain sustainability and get enough fish to comfortably feed everyone's families, I accept that this is just an online game, and at this point in my life, it would not be worth the hours it would take to solve this problem. Perhaps the game itself isn't even nuanced enough to have a win-win solution, but I believe the real world certainly is.

* = After I changed my goal at least. (I may have run out of fish in the pond once or twice in the first few rounds).