

# Life long commercial fisherman invites tourists along for the ride

Juneau fisherman says, 'If adventure be in your soul, sign on!'

Posted: June 18, 2011 - 9:23pm



**Klas Stolpe / Juneau Empire**

F/V Tia Lynn captain Andy Massey gaffs aboard a halibut as deckhand, and step-son, David Hamilton cleans fish and client Richard Mattson watches during Massey's newest business venture. Massey is giving tourists an exciting and unique Alaskan experience by signing them on as crew on day outings while he harvests his commercial quota.

By Klas Stolpe

## JUNEAU EMPIRE

It was probably a good thing three of captain Andy Massey's crew did not show up as he cast lines away and the F/V Tia Lynn moved out of Harris Harbor. Like any lifelong commercial fishing captain, and like time and tide, Massey waits for no man and would give them an ear-full of "salty language" if he did.

"I learned early on that if you ask a girl out twice and she comes up with a phony excuse then she doesn't want to go," Massey said. "When I started fishing, if you were late you missed the boat, then you lost your job and the paycheck."

Of course Massey said this all with humor. Not the humor of a 54-year-old man who has been commercial fishing since 1975 at age 17 and been through "hell and high water," but the man who was using his wisdom of the sea to insure he had a retirement life on the horizon.

Raised in the Norwegian settled fishing town of Petersburg, Massey discovered at an early age his calling was on the deck of a commercial long

liner. Old Norwegian Ernest Enge on the F/V Martina gave him his start and he crewed his way along.

The federal government decided that an Individual Fishing Quota (IFQ) was needed to allow an individual to harvest a percentage of the Total Allowable Catch (TAC) of halibut and black cod (sablefish). It implemented the IFQ/ITQ program in 1995 to qualifying fishermen, mostly skippers.

A quota was issued to owners or leaseholders of vessels that sold halibut and black cod at any time in 1988-1990. Shares were calculated by the best five years of catches from 1985-90 for cod and 1984-90 for halibut.

Captains banded together to fish, and crew lost jobs. A high of 3,450 distinct vessels landed halibut in 1994 and that shrunk to 1,156 by 2008 (1,404 to 362 for sablefish).

Massey through the years has stayed on a reliable boat, the F/V Westerly, and crews halibut and black cod in the Spring and Fall.

In 1998, for roughly \$300,000, he added to his crew income by buying 23,000 pounds of halibut IFQ and the right to fish it. The plan was for it to become a retirement fishing nest egg to sleepily harvest with a cup of coffee in hand.

“Uncle Sam must have thought I didn’t need to relax,” Massey laughed. “Don’t get me started on the feds in state waters.”

The International Pacific Halibut Commission, which had been shaving off a pound here and a pound there over the years, cut the 2011 halibut quota nearly in half, bankrupting many who bought in to the fishing business in 2005.

“Their story is fish stocks are so depressed that you can only justify 2.3 million for the commercial fleet,” Massey roars. “When it used to be 10.5 peaked out. When I go out there I don’t see any difference. I go through all my logbooks and I get the same catch rate I always had. I think they are full of... well, anyway.”

Massey’s initial investment of 23,000 pounds has dieted off to 4,900. To help offset his investment costs Massey has started the next reality Alaskan adventure: crewing on board a working Alaskan Halibut fishing vessel.

**"I needed to do something," Massey said. "I had to spread that poundage out to make it a viable interest, or just get out of it. I have to fish my pounds anyway; I may as well try to make some money at it. I just had to build a better mouse trap."**

**An Alaska Legislative House Bill that passed in 2005 allowed the purchase of 7-day crew licenses to allow visitors an affordable way to engage in a sort of extreme tourism adventure by actually participating in the fishery as a crewmember. The bill also forbids a wage, thus combating illegal or unethical hiring practices.**

**By Alaska statute a resident or non-resident can purchase a multiple-day commercial crew license, however, they cannot sport fish from the vessel, nor can commercial vessels allow sport fishing on board.**

**Massey is marketing a six- to eight-hour day. He will license clients at the boat. Clients sign on as crew and learn to bait, set and haul gear and "experience what it's like fishing with 200 hooks instead of just one."**

**"I am not letting them grab a gaff or use a knife," Massey said. "I might let them bait a hook or two. If they look like they are dangerous I will relieve them of duty. They will need to understand right off the bat that I am the skipper. The idea is just to give them a little taste of my slice of heaven."**

**As the Tia Lynn began passing the large docked "sardine cans" full of tourists, Massey was conducting the dude-fishing crew's safety meeting. Crew were educated about survival suits, life rafts, and most, importantly, the VHF, "for when you give me a heart attack," Massey said to laughs.**

**Massey distributes "oilskins" and the gear baiting begins. This trip would be all watchers, yet Massey explained the ins and outs of the work with patience.**

**"We are using salmon and squid," Massey said, placing a hook into a piece of salmon his deckhand, and stepson, David Hamilton had cut. "We will be fishing in heavy flea bottom so we don't want the gear to soak too long."**

**With gear baited and the F/V Tia Lynn reaching a secret fishing spot Massey's fingers traveled over a chart book.**

**"I have caught fish here, and here, and here," Massey said. "Here I caught a cold."**

The crew enjoys the banter of a real, live Alaskan born fisherman.

Four skates, or tubs, of gear, each 150 fathoms (900 feet) long with 50 baited hooks, are set over with buoys and anchors at each end — roughly two-thirds of a mile of fishing on the bottom.

“I set across the tide to catch the fish washing back and forth with the tide,” Massey says. “It’s easier to set with the tide but I like things difficult.”

Massey’s logbook is imprinted with the latitude and longitude of each end, the depth, hook size and spacing, gear type, target species, date and time, crew, and his IFQ number.

“Federal regulations in state water,” Massey mumbles. Halibut, black cod, and various ocean crab in the Bering Sea are federally regulated while herring, salmon, and crab are state burdens. “Don’t get me started.”

With gear fishing the Tia Lynn motors towards whale country. Crew eyes are pressed to the galley windows as they snack on salmon and tanner crab spreads purchased locally.

Killer whales provide a show and move on as a crewmember photographs from the bow sprite. If the gillnet fleet were fishing the crew would watch the action, and if humpbacks were about the skipper would lower an underwater microphone and listen to whale chatter.

Massey drops the anchor near shore and lowers a deepwater camera. The camera’s LED lights provide a 15-foot underwater view of crab and various critters below and shows it live on a TV in the galley.

When gear is hauled and halibut cleaned and iced the Tia Lynn heads to port. Salable by-catch like pacific cod or red snapper, after being weighed and logged, will be given to the Glory Hole.

Massey has to deliver fish in accordance to existing commercial laws. If a crewman wants to buy a specific fish it is marked during icing. When the fish are delivered at the dock the marked fish is taken to Jerry’s Meats for processing, freezing and shipping. Any fish not sold to crew is sold off the dock or to a processor.

With the lines tied fast at dock, hands shaken and crew departed, Massey leans back into his captain’s chair.

**“Another thing,” Massey says. “I am getting to the age now where it is tough to do the brutal stuff anymore. You go out there and make a 50,000-pound halibut trip like we did last fall, you just don’t bounce back like you used to. This is an experience cruise, an Alaskan adventure, something they can’t get anywhere else. And it’s not a cattle car operation, its small and homey.”**

**To reach Massey, call 500-2316 or visit [www.alaskalongliner.com](http://www.alaskalongliner.com).**