

# **DEFENDING YOUR LIVELIHOOD WITH LITTLE TIME, NO MONEY AND FEW RIGHTS**

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## **Introduction**

I am an inshore shellfisherman and have been for twelve years, I fish local waters off the east coast of Yorkshire, from a surf beach of a town called Hornsea from a small vessel which is under 8 meters in length. There is an historical fishery in this area for shellfish where boats are launched from the beach. It is essentially a subsistence living but is one of the largest employers in an area otherwise dominated by agriculture. The area is designated as having unusually high unemployment. The waters that I fish have some of the most productive inshore crab and lobster grounds in Europe. The main species caught are the edible crab (*Cancer pagurus*) and the European lobster (*Homarus gammarus*).

## **Evolution of a conflict**

In 1997 I was invited into the office of a local shellfish merchant to whom I land my catches, to discuss a proposed development off the coast. During the conversation it became apparent there was a proposed development by an American based global power generation company called InterGen, to build gas storage caverns underground on the coast. InterGen is jointly owned by the oil company Shell and the construction company Bechtel. The gas storage caverns are created by washing out the salt from underground deposits located under the near-shore sea. The concentrated salt water was to be pumped directly into the sea in the inshore area. Storage space for large volumes of natural gas is created and would be linked to the national grid. These caverns have a finite lifespan and can be used for waste disposal after gas storage.

The shellfish merchant told me that he had been appointed as fisheries liaison on behalf of InterGen and he was in the position to pay me a sum of money to move my fishing equipment so that a drilling barge could enter the area. I told him, in no uncertain terms, that this was not the correct way to conduct business and was disappointed that the company was being underhand. The usual format for inshore marine engineering was for the contractor to approach either local Sea Fishery Committees for advice on who to contact or for consultation to take place in a live debate with the contractors, agents, fishermen and other stakeholders.

A year prior to this meeting I had attended a presentation given to the local community about the gas cavern by InterGen and spoke to their project manager and asked to be kept up to date with the proposed development. I also told him of the need to consult fishermen with regards to the seaward pipeline and proposed discharge.

Despite this the discussion with my shellfish merchant this was the first contact I had received about the proposed plan. The project had already been through planning and had been passed by all the relevant agencies, and none had contacted the fishermen for their viewpoint. At this time I became aware that there was building taking place on the land-based works that would develop and control the gas storage and a barge had been contracted to commence drilling at sea as soon as the equipment was available.

## **Formation of the Withernsea Inshore Fishermen's Association**

I organised a meeting with small boat fishermen, none of whom at this time, belonged to an association, and we hastily formed the Withernsea Inshore Fishermen's Association using a constitution that was originally set up to help local fishers using beach launched boats to obtain better facilities. The group at the meeting realised that this small existing association's structure was not geared to dealing with a large powerful company. A turbulent meeting developed and the small association quickly grew to include as a member every fisher using a boat launched from the beach in this area.

The newly formed association contacted InterGen to request an environmental statement. After having some difficulty understanding it we arranged for a marine biologist to decipher the scientific jargon for us. It transpired that it was little more than an out of date desk study that was full of inaccuracies and some statements were downright false. For example, the statement claimed that "*No fishing takes place in this area, though one cannot discount some small scale exploitation*" (Environmental Resource Management, 1997).

After analyzing the impact assessment we challenged the relevant agencies and a meeting was convened. At 11 pm the night before the meeting we faxed a list of questions to InterGen to be tabled at the next day's meeting.. The company had secured the services of some new professionals including new marine consultants, Institute of Estuarine and Coastal and studies, Hull University. and discharge engineers (H.R. Wallingford). The responses to the questions given at the meeting left a lot to be desired and shortly afterwards the company lost the licences to discharge

salt and water pumped from the deposits as it was revoked by the UK Environment Agency.

### **Have we learned anything?**

This chain of events has led to my participation in the *Who owns the sea?* workshop. I have heard the rhetoric about integrated coastal zone management and read articles about fishermen getting involved with scientists, planners and other interested parties. I would like to attempt to throw some light on why difficulties arise when attempting to answer the question of who owns the sea.

By their very nature fishermen are individuals and competitive, they are also fiercely protective of threats to a livelihood, which is difficult by anyone's standards. Perceived threats to their activities are reacted to with anger or indifference. Most fishermen feel that they are being attacked from all sides and having their freedom restricted through, for example, cuts in catches, by quotas, health and safety regulations, poor prices, lack of investment in facilities despite contributing to the local and national economy and poor infrastructure.

Fishers are, in the eyes of some people, not the brightest star in the sky, but they have a knowledge and experience that is hard won and worth putting into the melting pot when deciding how to deal with coastal issues.

From my experience, challenging this one company cost me and my business partner at least £8000 each. However my experiences prompted me to read for a degree in coastal marine biology at university. This has given me a better understanding of current issues and their implications for people using the coastal zone. The final

result of losing money attending meetings and preparing our case was that InterGen sold the rights and moved on; I am now faced with rolling over on my beliefs that large organizations cannot be allowed to pursue their interests at the expense and inconvenience of small communities, or losing even more money.

Attending meetings is an alien activity for fishermen, as is writing letters of protest. Appointing a representative for your association is costly and too expensive for the owners of smaller vessels to undertake. Meetings dealing with resource use in the coastal zone between fishermen and developers will often disintegrate into a shambles because fishers are individuals and generally have no one else to answer to, unlike other participants in the meeting who generally represent large institutions. The result of this individualism is that most fisheries issues tend to be avoided until the 11<sup>th</sup> hour, which leads to more frustration and resentment. Participating contractors then have to use the stock solution of offering money to address poor management of a project; the amount of money offered tends to rise as the deadline approaches. This creates a compensation culture amongst the fishermen and negotiations become hampered by financial expectations and the track records of previous disputes.

From my experience with this one company and several other projects that are either being developed or proposed is that recognition of small scale fishing enterprises is virtually nil unless the fishermen organise and protest. They are then viewed as being uncooperative and militant. A major cause of disputes results from poor communication in that most fishermen are not able to understand the scientific jargon used in environmental statements and are unable to pay for professional advice to help them interpret official reports.

## **Lack of knowledge of inshore fishing grounds and activities leads to poor planning decisions**

Agencies that are established to protect the environment are unlikely to be effective due to poor documentation of the value of inshore resources.

Lack of understanding of the dynamics of the fishing industry lead to assumptions that the planned project is “only a little piece of the pond” and will not affect the fishermen that much.

After reviewing all that I have learnt and experienced I come to the conclusion that apart from everybody involved in negotiations defending their corner, coastal zone management will always be a pipe dream unless all parties concerned have the knowledge of the worth of inshore fishing grounds and the direct and indirect contributions fishing makes to the economy and community structure of coastal areas

### **Question;**

**“Was that the only conflict around or are there others”?**

Over the time I have been fishing there have been quite a few but the scale of projects is increasing. Most solutions to disputes between fishers and contractors offer compensation payments to fishermen, but I am convinced some of the projects should be challenged on environmental grounds. The main problem comes when contractors or planners don't contact the most affected stakeholders and then at the 11<sup>th</sup> hour all

hell breaks loose. The day of a fisherman is usually spoken for if the weather is fine and if not it tends to be taken up with maintenance or family matters. The cost of attending a meeting for an inshore fisherman in the main lobster season can be up to £500 per day, money that is essential for the winter months.

**Question; “Is the association still active”?**

Yes it is still active but I have had to stand down as chairman due to the amount of money I lost representing the fishermen against InterGen and other issues. The association is under threat from the tactics of oil companies and other contractors attempting to split the group with offers of better conditions if the number of fishermen is smaller within an association.

Large organisations that are supposed to represent fishermen appear to wear two hats and work for oil and marine contractors on a regular basis. This I fear is possibly the main cause why inshore vessels are railroaded. The sums of money involved in these projects are immense.

The attitude to the sea is one of a dustbin as far as some companies are concerned. Removing and treating waste on land is a far costlier exercise than pumping out to sea to, quote “return to ambient levels”.

There is a strong body of opinion amongst interested parties who think fishermen want helping but generally fishermen will help themselves to secure markets etc. The main help to fishermen I feel that is required is proper documentation of marine

resources. Areas that are given consent for planning at sea or on the coast appear to achieve that with less stringent rules than that of land based developments.

## **References**

Environmental Resource Management. (1997) Environmental Assessment for a Natural Gas Storage Facility at Aldborough International Generating company (UK) Ltd