

This paper not to be cited without prior reference to the author

FISHERMEN AND SCIENTISTS: COLLABORATION AS THE BASIS FOR STOCK RECOVERY

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At the heart of European fisheries management lies a paradox: this is that whilst the amount of fisheries regulation has increased exponentially, most stocks of commercial interest have continued to decline, whether measured in terms of biomass or age profile. One does not have to go along with an extreme prognosis of imminent commercial extinction to accept that our stocks are not managed to either their biological or economic optimum. The uncertainties which arise from changing environmental factors merely underline the importance of effective management measures.

Various remedial measures have found favour at different times. Minimum mesh size and minimum landing sizes, days at sea restrictions, closed areas and closed seasons and, most draconian, the permanent removal of fishing capacity through the multi-annual guidance programmes, have all been centre stage at one time or other. Each of these measures has an underlying logic and has been applied with greater or lesser effect. Nevertheless, seen in totality, although the CFP has embraced all of these measures to one degree or another, most of our key commercial stocks are outside safe biological limits. The recent application of the precautionary approach to setting TACs merely illuminates the failure of the regulatory regime to halt stock depletion to date.

It is my contention that the artificial separation of fisheries administrators, policy makers and fisheries scientists on the one hand, and fishermen on the other, is a fundamental reason why the CFP has failed to develop fisheries policies which deliver stock recovery.

The increase in mesh size from 90mm to 100mm in the North Sea/West of Scotland in 1993 is instructive and highlights the central issues well. It is now well recognised that the selectivity benefits of the increased mesh size were significantly undermined by the use of thicker, more rigid twines. Fishermen, fearing the loss of marketable catch in a mixed fishery, made an individual economic decision which counteracted the public conservation objective of increased mesh size. All of the ingredients for a failed policy are here: minimal involvement in a decision imposed by a remote bureaucracy and political machine; a culture of non-compliance sustained by peer group support; the technical means to defeat the rule without contravening the law; and a short-term economic incentive. This is but one example but even superficially more enforceable measures, such as capacity reductions have their complications and complexities, which tend to undermine their direct impact on

fishing mortality. MAGPIV, for example, was measured in terms of engine power and tonnage but one tonne of modern capacity can be many times more efficient than one tonne of obsolete capacity and the impact in conservation terms has been nebulous at best. The Commission has recently expressed exasperation that this is an instrument incapable of achieving its objectives.

All of the measures adopted to date under the CFP have a common characteristic. They were conceived, developed, agreed and applied within a highly centralised system of control, in which the policy makers are separate and apart from those who will be obliged to adhere to the new rules -the fishermen. Consultative arrangements do not allow for any significant degree of influence and in any event, blanket measures applied to the whole or large parts of the CFP, necessarily fit only where they touch and contain an element of rough justice. This has played no small part in alienating fishermen from the system which is supposed to safeguard their livelihoods. All this has a profound relevance to the way in which fisheries science is applied to European fisheries; to its impact on policy and its impact on fishermen and ultimately to fish stocks.

If fisheries regulation is largely ineffectual, the role of ICES is limited to tracking the decline of commercial stocks and sounding warnings of impending disaster on the most vulnerable fisheries – not an unimportant role but one far short of its full potential.

One of the unintended side effects of the current centralised system is that an alienated, dispirited, fishing industry is frequently placed in an oppositional, confrontational relationship with fisheries scientists who, in the shape of ACFM, are often the bearers of bad news and unwelcome advice. The limitations, complexities, and imperfections of fisheries science have, perhaps understandably, been used to denigrate this or that piece of advice - if the consequence of accepting that advice is short-term loss of income or increased bureaucracy for the operation of fishing vessels.

There is in all this a vicious circle at work. Decisions that affect fishermen's income and operations are made remote and distant from those who must bear the weight of those decisions; and fisheries scientists are perceived as aiding and abetting the insensitive bureaucrats and politicians who make rigid, inappropriate and in the final analysis, ineffectual, rules which hamper fishermen in their, sometimes desperate, attempts to remain financially viable. Faced with blunt, inappropriate regulations, ways of circumventing those rules are sought which bring short-term relief to individual enterprises but longer-term decline in stocks and the common good. The tragedy is that all other things being equal, advice in subsequent years is generally more severe because remedial steps have been inadequate or have been circumvented. Falling TACs are followed by more desperate attempts to maintain economic viability.

All this is deeply unsatisfactory from all points of view:

- * fishermen see the stocks on which they depend decline, notwithstanding annual fluctuations and the vagaries of recruitment
- * administrators see their proposals diluted by politicians and circumvented by fishermen
- * fisheries scientists bemoan the inadequacy of landings data and cannot enjoy being denigrated for their counsel of despair. They are too often perceived as

agents of a **centralised** system of control rather than collaborators in obtaining the best management regime consistent with the available possibilities

- * fish are caught too young, leading to undue reliance on one or two incoming year classes with increased uncertainty and instability in the fisheries

Perhaps this paints an unnecessarily black picture but nevertheless contains sufficient truth to be a **recognisable** picture of the current CFP.

What is the alternative?

The alternative is a **decentralised** system which involves fishermen and scientists in a flexible, adaptable arrangement for policy formulation; one which is developed to focus on the needs of specific sea areas and specific fisheries, but that equally still deals with the international dimension of fish stock management; and one that brings fisheries scientists and fishermen together in collaboration to jointly identify problems and seek the best solutions.

Cynics might argue that a combination of political inertia, national and individual self-interest and the complexities of the issues make such an arrangement unachievable. Nevertheless, there is a growing belief that the 2002 Review of the CFP must move in this direction, if only because the demands of expansion of the European Union from 15 to 22 or even 30 member states, makes decision-making on detailed fisheries policy by the Council of Ministers, simply inconceivable.

There is also the example of the Irish Sea emergency measures for cod at the beginning of this year, which might usefully be viewed as a model of Zonal or Regional Management in embryo. With the Commission in the chair and national administrators, scientists, and fishermen from those member states which operate fleets in the Irish Sea in attendance, emergency measures were agreed and implemented, with what was, for Brussels, breathtaking speed. Admittedly the conditions were far from perfect and the agreements accepted with the greatest reluctance as a last ditch effort to safeguard the cod stocks; nevertheless we have in this a working model of regional policy making which might be developed and adapted in the future.

It would be difficult to overestimate the significance of this arrangement for the future inter-relationship of fishermen and scientists. Available information was collated and presented; gaps in the data were identified; fishermen's intimate knowledge of fishing techniques and fish migration patterns were pooled; future research requirements agreed; temporary closed areas determined; technical measures (including mesh size, twin thickness) agreed — all before the Council of Ministers provided its seal of approval.

This contrasts with the routine relationship between fisheries scientists and fishermen which is not infrequently characterised by **rancour**, misunderstanding and mistrust when they are brought together in semi-artificial circumstances to hear this or that bad news, and in the final analysis, which both fishermen and scientists are at the mercy of the Council or Commission.

It is important not to idealise the Irish Sea Regional meetings. They were arduous, took place in difficult circumstances, and of necessity much was learned in the process. They have also yet to bear fruit in terms of stock recovery. Nevertheless fishermen's representatives and working fishermen returned to their ports advocating support for the

agreed measures and determined to secure refinements in subsequent measures which balance vessel viability with recovery of the cod stock. This contrasts with the countless number of regulations imposed from above with minimal or cosmetic consultation and to which resistance or circumvention are the stock, almost automatic, responses.

Zonal (Regional) Management is no panacea. Hard decisions will still be required. But as a vehicle for stock recovery that combines the experience of fishermen with the knowledge and techniques of fisheries scientists, it has no obvious competition. The present overcentralised arrangements have not worked and have only succeeded in driving a wedge, a false dichotomy, between the fishing industry and fisheries scientists whom, when all is said and done, should have a common agenda, common aims and objectives.

Stock recovery programmes for all of the main fishing zones are the priority if we are to avoid further decline and possibly collapse of the more vulnerable stocks; and the relationship between scientists and fishermen is fundamental in the development of these programmes. The particular mix of measures and how they should be applied, is the collaborative enterprise in which we should be jointly engaged. We require an institutional setting which encourages, indeed requires, this and it is our hope that the 2002 review of the CFP will see progress in this direction.