

Red Herrings

A Simulation Exercise on Fisheries Decision Making

Regulators' Briefing

The Context:

The Common Fisheries Policy's political objective is the sustainable exploitation of a resource which is largely invisible, mobile (thus difficult to count), and dynamic (fish numbers are constantly changing in response to human exploitation and other factors). This means that the EU fisheries managers – i.e. regulators - are in continual need of accurate assessments of the numbers of fish that can be caught safely, so that quotas - the maximum amounts of fish that can be legally landed in Europe in a specified time period - may be set annually in dialogue with scientists and other interest groups.

The International Council for the Exploration of the Seas (ICES) is the scientific body charged with making these assessments.

The CFP is probably the most science-dependent sector in the EU. Science tends to dominate decision-making debates in fisheries, notwithstanding the obvious importance of political factors. Few political decisions can ever be made without some degree of specialised knowledge and nowhere is this truer than in EU fisheries.

EU decision-makers say that getting the science 'right' is fundamental to sustainable exploitation. In fact the crisis of overfishing has often been couched in terms of a 'crisis of knowledge', where fisheries knowledge is highly contested.

What They Do:

The regulators need to make decisions that ensure the *environmental sustainability* of stocks while *at the same time making sure that fishermen can make a living* and support fishing communities across Europe many of whom rely upon European subsidies.

Regulators make decisions about quotas by listening to the advice of scientists *while also taking into account the views of fishermen* who will have to implement decisions.

It is claimed that incorporating fishermen's views into decision making has taken the advantage of their wide experience and knowledge, producing better policies: not least because stakeholders can shed light on likely implications and consequences of different management measures. Their involvement may increase compliance with those regulations. Indeed, one reason previously cited

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for non-compliance with quotas was that fishermen felt that regulations emanating from the EU were illegitimate.

What some EU Member States Say:

UK Position:

Former UK Fisheries Minister, Elliot Morley, said: "The fishing industry have to recognise that there's a problem, and they're simply not doing that at the moment. It's disappointing there's no upturn in stocks. If the advice suggests it's as bad as this, we cannot ignore it."

Scottish Position:

Scottish national Party is on the side of the fishermen: The common fisheries policy, is "failing to deliver either prosperity for our communities or the sustainable stocks on which those communities depend".

What Environmentalists Say:

Environmentalists consistently argue that quota levels and fishing gear regulations are inadequate for effective conservation. They criticize the way quotas are fixed at higher levels than are advised by scientists, due to pressure from industry and politicians in the 'horse trading' that dominates decisions.

For many ENGOs, purporting to speak for the common good rather than for vested interests, fishing is a form of pillaging – or the 'F' word. EU greens have used the 'imminent' collapse of North Sea cod as a base for campaigning, and have argued that fishers are happy to 'sod the cod', while fishermen argue that for greens 'cod is god'

WWF, the global environment campaign, said: "For the past fifteen years, political pressure has led to quotas being set an average of 30% above the recommendations made by ICES. Although some interim measures have been put in place to take the pressure off fish stocks... they have clearly not been enough."

Chief executive of the Marine Stewardship Council, said: "The current mess and appalling mismanagement of the world's largest renewable food source is a consequence of the European Union's repeated refusal to follow scientific advice.

"As scientists issue warnings that the North Sea faces a similar collapse to that in Newfoundland in the early 1990s, the EU is no nearer to preventing the same thing from happening in our own waters."

Recreational fishers:

Recreational fishers share many views with the greens. They argue that the commercial sector has decimated many stocks that they enjoy fishing. Through sheer numbers alone, the anglers are becoming increasingly influential. In Europe, the political allocation of fishing privileges increasingly frequently favours angling. In many European countries recreational fishing makes more money than the commercial sector. Anglers take only three per cent of the total fish caught. Hence, they argue, sea angling provides the greatest economic returns for least environmental impact.

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Complexities:

Putting in place a total ban may not save stocks anyways. In mixed fisheries like the North Sea stocks are not located in distinct geographical areas of the ocean, so, for example, prawns and flat fish will live side by side with cod. Thus fishermen targeting prawns in the North Sea will also invariably catch between five and fifteen per cent cod, as 'bycatch'. And because cod is larger than haddock, a mesh size designed to catch mature haddock will also catch juvenile cod that has not has the opportunity to spawn.

The observance of these quotas and regulations has been thwarted by high rates of non-compliance, due to fishermen's endemic reluctance to comply.

The actual amount of fish caught has exceeded quotas for many species, for through the quota system fishermen are encouraged to practice 'high grading'. This means discarding from the catch 'substandard', or un-sellable, fish to increase the quality, and therefore value, of fish in the allowed quota. Environmentalists also decry the abuse of quotas through their inevitable 'bycatch'.

The non-targeted aquatic animals and plants caught unintentionally when fishermen draw up their indiscriminate nets can include large mammals like dolphins and even whales. Bycatch can make up to one third of the weight of total catch, while over 55,0000 tonnes of edible fish are discarded annually in the North Sea.

The fishing capacity of the Community fleets is thought to be forty per cent too large for the available fish resources.

Regulators' criteria on what to base their decisions and findings:

From what has been said above, regulators need to keep in mind the criteria they will need to apply in making their decisions. These might include things like the need to maintain livelihoods, to maintain fish stocks, to minimise and/or avoid damage to ecosystems, to maintain a scientific perspective, to be aware of and realistic about political positions of member states, to learn the lessons of the past.