

# Fishing in troubled waters

**The impact of the COVID-19 lockdown on a small-scale fishing in Lorient is vividly captured in the pages of a diary maintained by a gillnetter skipper's spouse**

Based on the diary entries of **Emmanuelle Yheul-Bertin** (emmanuelleyb@orange.fr), Deputy President of the Collectif Pêche et Développement, Lorient, France and translated from French by **Danièle Le Sann** (ad.lesann@orange.fr), France



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In March 2020, Emmanuelle Yheul-Bertin, wife of a gillnet skipper who runs a 13-metre gillnetter vessel with four men on board, began recording the experiences of skipper and crew during the COVID-19 lockdown. Her diary covers the period from mid-March to early May.

The first entry signals a gathering cloud of anxieties. "The media is reporting lockdown restrictions to prevent the spread of COVID," writes Emmanuelle, "but the artisanal fishery in Lorient is yet to recover from the impact of the winter's numerous storms."

The early entries outline the dilemmas faced by the fishing enterprise, torn as it is between lockdown orders and the need to survive. Questions mount. Will ports be functional? Will fish auctions continue? Will boats be eligible for relief in the event of lockdown? What is the skipper's responsibility towards his crew in the event of a virus outbreak on board? What about other factors: the closure of fish wholesale units; the withdrawal of the producers' organization; the risk that some fish merchants and fishmongers will take advantage of the situation and offer extremely low prices at the auction? Should the skipper continue or cease fishing operations?

The diary entry for Tuesday, 17 March reads: "Radio exchanges between skippers, phone calls to the authorities, numerous e-mails; a flow of divergent information but a decision has to be taken."

In the context, the skipper decides to continue fishing for four reasons: there is fish at sea; auction prices are correct; boats docked at the quay must continue paying docking charges; and no concrete announcements on aid have yet been made by the government.

Meeting the requirements of the COVID-19 safety protocol is one of the first challenges. "Impossible to go out to sea without a thermometer!" writes Emmanuelle on Monday, 23 March. From thermometers needed to monitor crew temperature, together with a special logbook to log the temperatures recorded, to keeping adequate stocks of sanitiser gel and masks on board, new responsibilities are added daily to the skipper's list.

In the first week of the lockdown period from 24 to 28 March, the price for fish remained steady and sales were good. The salaries paid over the fortnight were slightly higher than

those paid in 2019 over the same period. In small-scale fishing, salaries are traditionally paid every two weeks and correspond to a percentage of the sales at auction. So far so good but "what will happen in the coming weeks?" asks Emmanuelle.

On 3 April, in a measure that increased the confidence of the sector, the European Commission announced that the loss of vessel turnover would be compensated for up to 75 percent by the European Fund for Maritime Affairs and Fisheries (EFAMF).

From the week beginning 8 April, the port of Lorient saw its entire artisanal fleet setting sail again. The wholesalers were also present to organise their purchases according to the arrivals and the demand. However, the staff at the port remained drastically reduced. As a result, there was only one conveyor belt instead of the usual two at the auction. In order to aid the work of its staff, the port management asked the fishermen to sort their fish before putting it up for sale: an extra job for the crews who would not be paid more for this extra work. To further facilitate auction on a single belt, each boat had to bring its catch in two lots; the second lot fetched significantly lower prices as the wholesalers had already bought the best fish in the first lot at the auction. The first lot of auctions started before daybreak at 3 am. The second lot was completed by only around 7 am. The fish sold in the first auction at 3 am traded at around 7 € (8.2 USD). By 7 am, the same species of identical quality was worth only 2.5 € (2.9 USD).

The loss of earnings for the boat over the day's sale could amount to as much as around 2000 € (2,343.9 USD). While during the very first weeks of the lockdown, the market regulated itself, the subsequent weeks were tough. Fish merchants exploited the situation by offering low prices. Pollacks auctioned at 2.5 € (2.9 USD) were found a few hours later in the stalls of a local fishmonger, selling at 16 € (18.8 USD)! In order to resolve the problem of low demand, boat owners considered going out on shifts through the week, but no agreement on this could be reached.

The situation finally improved by the last week of April. Sole which was negotiated at 10 € (11.7 USD) on Saturday, April 25th, went up to 20 € (23.4 USD). The rise in auctioned prices was due to the reactivation of the second belt,

with which the auction returned to normal. In early May, the government announced the lifting of the lockdown.

“Will May 11th mark the end of the crisis? No! Politicians and the media insist that it is a milestone and return to normalcy will take time,” notes Emmanuelle, pointing out also the few signs of hope that the crisis had signalled, “There has been a real mobilisation to find solutions for the fishing industry, particularly at the European level. Aid will be granted to

affected boats and crews and a communication campaign is being set up to raise consumer awareness.”

The interesting documentation ends with a dairy entry made on Thursday, 7 May 2020. “The port of Lorient managed reasonably well through the lockdown as the actors had the will to adapt to the new situation,” writes Emmanuelle, adding, “This was not without difficulty, but work was maintained, which was not the case in all the French ports.” 🇫🇷

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