

# The Write Stuff

The website of Comité Local des Pêches Le Guilvinec, the local fisheries committee of Le Guilvinec in France, celebrates its second anniversary and a treasure of over 600 articles

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**P**ays Bigouden is a small territory of 400 sq km, with a population of 60,000, whose ancestry can be traced to the Neolithic Age, and whose main occupation is still fishing. Around 1,000 fishermen live in Pays Bigouden today, and 4,300 jobs can be directly linked to fishing activities, with 250 boats landing 40,000 tonnes of fish. Fishing can be divided into three categories near the coast: small-scale fishing vessels (5 to 10 m overall length),

tax paid by the fishermen. The Committee's mission is to defend the fishermen's main interests, which means safeguarding their social, economic and human rights. Given this mandate, the Committee's elected members are always seeking ways to circulate information both within the Committee and beyond, so as to reach as many fishermen as possible as well as society at large.

During the 1980s and 1990s, the Committee published a quarterly newspaper called *Kelaouen Ar Mor*, in the Breton language, and another called 'News from the Sea, in French. But by the start of 2000, *Kelaouen Ar Mor* had to wind up for financial reasons. The Committee then turned to the local media to disseminate information. Though this method continues, it has its drawbacks: limited space in newspapers, and a disinterest among journalists for subjects regarded as important by the Committee.

In 2008, the Committee decided to turn to the simple, cheap and efficient media of the Internet. Since its launch, the Committee's website ([www.comitedespeches-guilvinec.fr](http://www.comitedespeches-guilvinec.fr)) has attracted more and more visitors—from a few hundred hits per page to several thousands each month.

## Members' contribution

The principal aim of the Committee's website is to be in direct touch with all its fishermen members, and to remind them that each one contributes financially to the professional organization through a tax raised by the State. The tax is a levy of 0.86 per cent on the gross sales

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between 15 and 50 nautical miles coastal/ inshore fishing vessels (12 - 18 m overall length) and off shore fishing vessels out to 200 nautical miles (20 - 24 m overall length). Over 200 of the boats belong to boatowner-skippers, while the rest belong to local small shipowners.

The Comité Local des Pêches Le Guilvinec, the local fisheries committee of Le Guilvinec, was officially established in 1946, and is now governed by a French law of 1991. Under that law, local committees are regarded as institutions comprising trade unionists and shipowners (thus assuring the representation of both fishermen and shipowners), which have to ensure that a general election of fishermen takes place every four years. Funding for the Committee comes from a compulsory special

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made by each boat in Pays Bigouden. This tax is paid back to the Committee each year, in a number of instalments. The Committee tries to ensure that each paying fisherman gets daily information on the actions taken in their name. The website builds up trust among the fishermen, who regard it as a sort of mirror that highlights their life and work at sea, and helps them prepare for the future.

The second objective of the site is to fulfil a condition stipulated by the law of May 1991. Article 5 says that local committees should take actions in the economic and social spheres for all the members, especially with regard to information.

The forthcoming Law on Modernization of Agriculture and Fishing, which will be promulgated at the beginning of 2012, proposes, in Article 21, that fishing committees create for fishing companies and their employees a 'Mission of Information and Counsel'. The French State has a strong insistence on the circulation of information, and it believes that only informed fishermen can be the basis for any new policy being acceptable. It may not be very judicious for a State to insist on the need to inform since citizens may use information to contest the State's actions and organize passive or active resistance against it. However, it is a matter of pride that French law makes possible the guaranteed spread of information.

The third aim of the Committee's website is to convince the public at large that in Europe fishing still has a future, as exemplified in France by the fishermen of Pays Bigouden. Globally, there is a stereotyped notion, especially among politicians, that fishing is an 'ancient' activity no longer relevant to our 'modern' society. As one World Bank executive said in 2008 in Bangkok: "Fishing no longer exists in Europe; it has only become a vast market for fish products from the rest of the world". This phantasmagorical vision is fuelled by the recent European policy of emptying fishing ports by paying large sums of money for destroying or decommissioning boats. The mayors of the fishing ports of Pays Bigouden



The newsy website of the Comité Local des Pêches Le Guilvinec, France, launched in 2008, strengthens relations between fishermen

put all their energy into tourism and marinas, though fisheries can generate ten times more jobs than tourist boats.

Some environmental NGOs have joined the fray, considering fishermen as predators of marine resources and enemies of marine habitats, who should be eradicated as soon as possible.

Fresh actors, often with powerful new rights, can now be seen at sea. Among them can be ranked the environmentalists who champion marine protected areas (MPAs); companies willing to put up wind energy units in the open sea; sand miners who excavate sand for the construction industry; and waste disposal outfits, among others.

### Fight for a future

In the face of such a multipronged assault on their resource base, fishermen and their organizations have to fight for a future. They must show they are able to manage their resources themselves, having lived close to the marine environment and culture. They must make others understand that fishermen contribute to food sovereignty in France, and, as guardians of an unrivalled maritime culture, they are better placed to make sure that territories linked to the sea sustain their own resources with

integrity. In this regard, over the past two years, the Committee has helped give fishermen a better image.

The fourth objective of the Committee's website is to strengthen relations between fishermen and to increase its links with other like-minded sites, like the Regional Committee of Sea Fishing, the Committee of Labour Market Area, the Coalition for Fair Fisheries Arrangements (CFFA), the Collective Pêche et Développement and L'Encre de Mer.


The website relies on frequent updation. Each day sees a new report on the site. The site's writers attend fisheries meetings, meet fishermen, environmentalists, civil servants, State representatives, members of MPA agencies, and elected members of the European Parliament. With so many issues to choose from, the only problem is meeting deadlines. The site reflects the direct link of the Committee with the fishermen. The style of writing is informal, instinctive and journalistic, shunning the academic essay form, in preference for brief, direct sentences and short paragraphs. The site is more like a daily newspaper reflecting the real lives of fishermen and making visible the existence of those working far from land. It echoes the rhythm of the fishermen's workday. At dawn, new text, videos and photos must be up with subjects that concern them directly.

The Committee's general secretary was the first to don the mantle of journalist. He was soon joined by young project leaders, each specializing in one topic. Though few fishermen themselves write, those who do can often be scathing and original, speedily reaching the core of the subject. Some of the Committee's elected members have also had a hand at writing for this site. All contributors keep in mind the essential journalistic questions: Who? What? When? Where? Why? How?. They use catchy headlines, arresting introductions, and short paragraphs that lead to a conclusion. Lured by the satisfaction of seeing their work on the site, over the past two years, some fishermen have begun taking photos of everything at sea: working activities, fish, birds,

other boats, the sea, storms, the sky, nature in all its glory.

The Committee's website has been designed by a young team, Torr-Penn Production, using the free open-source software called SPIP (Système de Publication pour l'Internet Partagé or Participatif), which is a content management system designed for website publishing, oriented towards online collaborative editing. True to the principles of free software (see [www.fsf.org](http://www.fsf.org)), SPIP encourages collaboration and community participation. With this software and an Internet server, the Committee's site was up and running at a cost of a few hundred euros. Daily updating is automated, leaving the writers to concentrate on content. Today the site attracts nearly 10,000 unique visitors each month.

The articles on the site are often critical of the authorities and can sometimes upset administrations or local powers, since they always state the fishermen's point of view, however caustic. To avoid litigation, articles are vetted by the president or vice-president of the Committee and by the elected representatives. Potentially controversial articles are revised, sometimes based on comments from friendly outsiders. Readers' responses to articles are published, even if they counter the writer's point of view. Sixty such responses to around 600 articles have been published on the site so far.

Going by the experience of Comité Local des Pêches Le Guilvinec, it is possible to imagine a future network of websites run by fishermen or their organizations that would offer a worldview to complement the dominant discourse on fisheries. 

**For more** 

[www.peche-dev.org/](http://www.peche-dev.org/)  
**Collectif Pêche et Développement**

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