

European Union/ Netherlands

True partnership

A story about the struggle of a wife and husband against the threats facing inland fishermen in the Netherlands

By Marja Bekendam, wife of an inland fisherman and a member of *VinVis*, the women in fisheries network of the Netherlands.

Fifteen years ago my husband took over the fishing enterprise of his grandfather, which until then had been managed by his uncles, the brothers of his mother. His grandfather used to fish with a sailing boat in the largest bay of the Netherlands, which is also the delta of two rivers. In 1932, a dike was built to close the bay, and the water slowly changed into freshwater from its erstwhile salted state, and thereby became a lake. That change also had an impact on the species of fish caught in those days.

Between 1940 and 1965, land was reclaimed from the lake and two polders made. This also decreased the area available for fishing, which, again, had an impact on the fishery. Besides, pollution from the rivers affected the fish and caused eel to get tumours, reducing their appeal for human consumption. As a result, the fishery no longer provided enough income, and my husband's uncles decided to work in a local factory for two days a week.

In the 1970s and 1980s, the rivers became cleaner and the fish stocks recovered. The eel became healthy again. Also, uncommon species of fish began to be seen more and more. So when my husband took over the enterprise in 1989, he was able to earn a good living from fishing again. He caught eel in fykes from April up to November, bream with trawl nets from December to March, and, in the early spring, he sometimes caught smelt.

After some years, my husband could afford to modernize his fishing enterprise. He bought new fykes and even a secondhand boat. The modernization helped him reduce fishing time and invest in another business outside fisheries. The past experiences of his grandfather and uncles had taught him that inland fishing was very vulnerable to the impact of various unpredictables.

It turned out that he had made a wise decision. In the mid-1990s, the government decided that it was

necessary to remove the polluted sediment from the bottom of the lake. Even though it was known that a clean layer of mud covered the polluted sediment, it was feared that the underlying polluted sediment might affect the groundwater and thus perhaps also the drinking water. Plans were made to clean the bottom of the lake by dredging. A huge storage depot was built in the middle of the lake into which the polluted mud was dumped to make an artificial island. Besides that, many more little islands were made at the delta of the river for birds to breed. The area for fishing got reduced again and, in a way, history repeated itself. Grandpa had lost many acres of fishing ground when the polders were made, and we too had to give up fishing ground for all the artificial islands. A lot of meetings with the fishermen were held those days. The government promised us compensation and, in the beginning, we believed them.

At first, I was not very interested in the problems my husband was facing as a fisherman because I felt that it was his business. My husband left home every day at the same time and always returned in the evening, although I could never be certain at what time. I was kept busy at home looking after three young children and so I could not help my husband with the accounts and other administrative work. I only helped him write letters—but he had to tell me what to write. My husband always gave me reports of the meetings he attended. After a hard day's work, we would sit around the table until late into the night, discussing the conflict between the inland fishermen and the government. The more I heard, the more I learned, and the more I



became involved.

To get compensation from government, we had to deal with professional experts and legal advisers. But we were just simple folk and though my husband worked hard, he wasn't a professional expert either and so we had to get help from one of the fishermen's organizations. We hired a lawyer who knew everything about procedures and laws, but nothing about fishing. So we had to tell him what to do. My husband and I had a hard time those days. But it also felt good to fight together. We found out that we were complementary to each other. He taught me a lot about fisheries and my office experience helped me write letters and do the budgeting and accounting.

We finally did receive a small compensation from the government, but far less than we expected. Our struggle is not over yet, but we survived so far. We were able to survive and continue because of the alternative business my husband started in the good days. And although my husband no longer fishes every day of the week, nor every week of the month, nor every month of the year, he is still a fisherman and I am still a fisherman's wife.

Because of my involvement in the struggle of the inland fishermen, someone drew my attention to *VinVis*, the women in fisheries network of the Netherlands. After visiting one of their meetings, I decided to join the network. So far I am the only inland fisherman's wife in *VinVis*. But it surprises me how much I have in common with the other women who are wives of seagoing fishermen. We have to deal with the same kind of problems, and it feels good to share experiences and knowledge. It is unfortunate that there are practically no women participating in the existing fishermen's organizations. But I hope one day our network will no longer be needed. That will be the day that women are fully accepted as true partners in fisheries.

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