

European Union/ United Kingdom

Get on with it...?

The future of the fishing communities of Shetland Islands is threatened by government regulations

By Donna Polson, who is with the fishermen's wives association, FISHING SOS SHETLAND

In 2002-2003, Shetland's fishing industry was reduced in size due to the de-commissioning scheme; some other boats were sold or lost. The result of this was that the Shetlands whitefish fleet was slashed by 40 per cent in just two years. Shetland is now left with an ageing whitefish fleet of only 20 boats, barely enough to keep the whole infrastructure going.

On top of this, the worst yet fisheries deal possible for the Shetland fleet, was enforced in December 2003. A haddock permit scheme was introduced with the intention of protecting cod stocks and ultimately limiting fishing opportunities in certain areas. The areas most affected are where our local fleet works. In order to fish legally and remain viable, Shetland's whitefish boats must now buy days and quota—not only does this increase overheads but it also diminishes profits.

With the demise of the fleet, job losses were inevitable. In Shetland's most fishery-dependent community, the island of Whalsay, the young who had set their hearts on being fishermen, now leave the isle to train as sea cadets. Experienced fishermen, now made unemployed through the decommissioning scheme, have found there are no jobs for them on board the remaining whitefish vessels—some have retrained, a few found alternative employment, and others remain unemployed.

Losing boats has hit the community hard—the effect is profoundly felt. Remaining fishermen and families now feel disillusioned about the future of the industry. One fisherman left with his family to find alternative training in England.

The result of all this has been a dramatic drop in births in Whalsay—from an average of 16 to 17 babies each year, only 2 babies were born in 2004. Island midwives are finding they can no longer maintain their qualification at such a level and have to do their training elsewhere.

It has been said that we have not yet felt the full effects of the downturn in our industry. However, the knock-on effects are slowly but surely making themselves felt by all sectors of the community, from shopkeepers to nurses.

Due to the fishing restrictions placed on the local boats and their need to buy days and quota, there is less money for boats to spend. This, along with the fact the fleet has been reduced, has affected all ancillary businesses such as engineering companies, net menders and shops, to name but a few. And, of course, the uncertainty of wages affects families too. Many fishermen's wives find there is now a need to work in order to supplement the income from fishing. The uncertainty of whether there will be a wage to pay household bills, including the mortgage, places a great amount of stress upon families.

Every year, fishing families wonder if there will be a job for them the following year. These yearly negotiations are a cruel way to treat our fishermen. Many fishermen and their families would gladly see the back of these December fishing councils. They are held at a time when many fishermen are at home for a break. But instead of getting away from all the pressures of work, they find insurmountable stress put on them as they wait to see what deal is made. This detracts from what Christmas should be—time spent with family.

Furthermore, after Christmas, fishermen must take the time to find out what the new regulations are, how they are implemented and what effect they will have on fishing activities. And behind every fisherman, there is a family and community anxiously waiting to see if they can survive the next 12 months.

The restrictions placed upon the fleet last year have had a devastating effect upon Shetland's communities, with places such as Whalsay depopulating. If more constraints are placed upon the Shetland fleet, they undoubtedly will have to move away. Families will have to leave too—and that would mean an end for Shetland's fishing communities.

Our community needs a boost; it needs to know that there is a future in the whitefish sector and ultimately a future for our coastal fishing communities. Jobs need to be created to give the young who wish to stay at

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Fisheries policymakers must realize that there is more at stake than fish stocks. Many of Shetland's communities are dependent upon the fishing industry—it is their livelihood. More thought must be given to our coastal communities and the effect fishing policy has upon them; they cannot simply be left, as we have been, to “get on with it”.

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