

What's the catch?

The launch of *A Livelihood from Fishing* at London's historic Billingsgate fish market was an occasion for some concerned reflection

Despite the early hour and morning chill, about 80 people turned up for the launch of Alain Le Sann's book, *A Livelihood from Fishing*, at London's Billingsgate Market on 29 January. Comprising a cross-section of the fishing community, participants included Members of Parliament, fish traders, fishermen, environmentalists, academics, NGO representatives and other interest groups.

Billingsgate Fish Market, and the early start, were chosen because Billingsgate is synonymous with the fishing industry in the UK: the name 'Billingsgate' has been associated with fish marketing over centuries. For almost as long as there has been human settlement in the London area, there has been a fish market there.

Today it is the UK's largest inland fish market, being served from almost every port in the UK. International trade is also increasingly important to Billingsgate: of its annual sales of 20,000-30,000 tonnes of fish and fish products, around 30 per cent is imported from more than 40 countries across five continents. Fish in fresh, frozen, salted, dried, smoked and a variety of processed forms are traded through the market.

However, the rise of the supermarkets and the vertical integration of the fishing industry have undermined the importance of Billingsgate. In the UK, between 60 and 80 per cent of the fresh and frozen fish consumed is retailed through the main supermarkets. Hundreds of small traders have been put out of business, and trading activities now bypass Billingsgate.

Billingsgate market was also chosen for the book launch as it provides an important link in the chain between

fishers, fish traders, processors, retailers and consumers. Over the last few years, the public have been led to believe that the sole cause of diminishing fish stocks is "too many fishermen catching too few fish". The blame for overfishing has been laid unfairly on fishermen. Consumers, retailers and traders must also recognize their responsibilities.

The book launch was intended to highlight the interdependence amongst fish as food, as an important commodity for trade, and as a source of livelihood. Given that irresponsible and ill-informed consumption and inconsiderate and short-term marketing practices are driving fish stocks to extinction, the battle for sustainability is as likely to be won in the market as on the high seas. For the organizers of the book launch, a historical and interesting venue such as Billingsgate would attract the various actors and interest groups, and facilitate dialogue at a neutral and interesting venue

The beginning of 1998 also seemed to be a particularly appropriate time to be focusing on such issues: 1998 has been designated the International Year of the Oceans by the United Nations General Assembly. Moreover, during the first six months of 1998, the UK government has the Presidency of the European Union (EU) at a time when fisheries are very much on the national, regional and international agenda.

Limited access

The EU is undertaking a review of its Common Fisheries Policy (CFP), and 'up for grabs' are areas which, up to now, have been protected for inshore and local fisheries by limited access under the jurisdiction of the coastal state (mainly the 6- and 12-mile zones). These restrictions may be lifted in line with Articles 2 and 38

of the Treaty of Rome, which define fish stocks in EU waters as a common resource where vessels of all member states are entitled to freedom of access. The outputs of this review, therefore, have far-reaching implications for coastal state control and inshore fisheries (within the 6-and 12-mile zones).

The UK Presidency also falls at a time when the issue of coherence is receiving greater attention. Under the Maastricht Treaty, the EU has a legal obligation to ensure that its various policies (CAP, CFP, Trade, Development, Co-operation, etc.) are coherent with each other. Fisheries agreements have come in for much criticism because of the negative impact they are said to have on the sustainable development of local fisheries in the third countries concerned. The UK Government, as President of the Council of Development Ministers and Council of Fisheries Ministers, is responsible for initiating a review of the EU's fisheries agreements (to be carried out by June 1999), and for establishing a Fisheries and Development Co-operation working group to examine the coherence issues between fisheries agreements under negotiation and the policy objectives for Development Co-operation.

At the Billingsgate book launch, Chris Underhill welcomed the guests and made an introductory speech which drew on his personal experience of growing up in

a small fishing community in Southern Spain. He noted, "Today, this community has become a tourist suburb. Completely deculturalized, it has lost its traditions and the original people have been driven out by the new owners of the villas. The loss of fishing traditions in many parts of the world is a very real threat to fishing people. Three-quarters of them come from the South, and it is they who produce 50 per cent of the fish that ends up on our plates. They also create a further 100 million or so shore-based jobs, so the loss of these fishing traditions will have a major impact."

To those of us who work in Intermediate Technology, the issue of sustainable livelihoods is of key importance. Creating a livelihood from fishing is as much about making ends meet, as it is about turning an honest penny. As this book emphasizes, earning a living or creating livelihoods from fishing is far more than a commercial activity. It is a way of life with cultural traditions, involving traditional knowledge and expertise, and requiring an understanding of the environment and the need to maintain an ecological balance.

Fundamental concept

This, concept of livelihoods, combining traditional ways of life with modern economic activities, is fundamental to Intermediate Technology's work and beliefs. It is a central pillar of the

organization and one which was established by our founder Fritz Schumacher. His 'Small is Beautiful' philosophy is very much alive today, despite those who like to contradict us by saying 'Big is Better'! Our answer to them is that powerful factory ships owned by a few large companies and employing only a few fishermen is not the answer.

If we are going to sustain our fish stocks in ways which ensure the continued supply of fish to provide livelihoods and to feed future generations, then fisheries must maintain their close links with the people of the sea. Sustainable fishing must, apart from conserving fish stocks, involve viable fishing communities and the sustaining of livelihoods in those communities. This is a central theme of this important book, and central to our work at Intermediate Technology.

Both Chris Underhill and Brian O'Riordan (IT's Fisheries Specialist) emphasized that conserving fish stocks and sustaining fisheries for future generations is as much about sustaining livelihoods and economic activities in coastal communities with access to few other resources, as it is about protecting the environment and preserving fish stocks. Biological sustainability is of little value to human society if it is isolated from social and economic sustainability. Economic development, when divorced from human development and ecological sustainability, invariably leads to greater inequality and poverty.

Disappointingly, the issues of fish marketing were only briefly touched on, despite many of the participants representing the wholesale and retail fish trade. Thoby Young, Director of the Fresh Food Company, commented that consumers all over the UK would like to know where the fish they are buying-in the supermarkets or on the slab-comes from, and how they can tell that it is from a sustainable source: "No such system, as far as I am aware, exists. Indeed, the only fish mark that is widely recognised in the UK would be the Scottish Salmon mark, and, as far as I understand, farmed salmon is itself a very damaging product environmentally, as a result of hi-tech methods. So, what can the fishing

industry, and possibly legislation as well, do to support consumers who would wish to contribute to the position outlined in the book?"

On the issue of the review and possible reform of the CFP, Austin Mitchell, MP for Great Grimsby and a great supporter and advocate of fishworkers' rights in the UK, highlighted the importance of coastal state management and giving fishermen greater responsibility as key stakeholders in fisheries: "We need a policy of coastal state management, a greater role for the nation state-the only guarantor of its own fish stocks, and their guardian for the next generation. We also need community control of fisheries, so that those people who are fishing locally can protect the stocks and can play a part in management. We need some system of management which makes the fisherman a stakeholder in the industry, instead of a predator and a looter. We need to make the fishermen stakeholders in the stocks, so that they become responsible for the management and understand the need for conservation."

"What we need to do," he continued, "is work towards greater coastal state control and local control by the local producer organizations. We need coastal state control because only the nation state has any interest in conserving the fish stocks and making laws. What the Common Fisheries Policy produces by making fish a common resource to which all members have equal access, is a competitive situation of 'open slather' and that can't go on.

Co-fishing

Andrew George, MP for St. Ives in Cornwall (a community with old fishing traditions and a high degree of dependency on fishing), supported this view, but took it a step further by advocating co-fishing and co-management and calling for the protection of coastal waters within the 6-and 12-mile limits: "Community fishing does exist in this country, and I think that it is something that we need to protect-We need to protect the work of the Sea Fisheries Committees, and we need to protect the (6-12 mile) fishing limits and the fish stocks which occur within those limits. Sustainable fisheries is certainly an

expression which has got very common currency today, and needs to, as it is the only basis for the future: we need to establish a policy which gives fishermen themselves a sense of stake, a responsibility, if you like, in the future management of the industry.

Certainly, we need to protect this where it does still exist in Britain, and it certainly exists in my area as 'co-fishing'. Fishermen go out as 'co-fleets' in the way that you (Chris Underhill) were describing in the Mediterranean, working together and recognizing the need to give the stock a rest in that area, arid to take responsibility for the management of it."

Charles Secrett of Friends of the Earth also supported this view of co-management, but pointed out that, in the case of Europe, "there is an impossible match between a political arrangement that can not deliver the social and environmental objectives that everyone sees as essential to resolving the crises. Two solutions that have been proffered are, on the one hand, local control over fish resources, and, on the other, measures to use appropriate technology to harvest those resources. But how can these objectives be realized under the Common Fisheries Policy, where there is a mismatch between a political arrangement and its inability to deliver what everyone accepts is needed?"

If you can't change it, the consequence is that you either carry on with it or you somehow find a way of escaping it. There is a political dimension to this that is so fundamental, and because it is so fundamental, it makes it so difficult to deal with. It seems to us that it's only by making a common alliance between environmental organizations, fishing industries and the communities in which they live and work, and politicians who are prepared to ban this other agenda, that we have the only chance of reforming the policy."

Commander Rankin of the Parliamentary Maritime Group agreed that the CFP needs reforming, but "it is not realistic to talk about getting out of the EU-it might be possible but it isn't going to happen. What is important is that we really work

from now until 2002 in getting the CFP right. However, the most important word that I haven't heard today is the whole question of subsidiarity. Getting down to the local fishermen, getting those people out of Brussels down at that level... I am very concerned that we get the scientists and the fishermen, the inspectors, the enforcers and the rest of them together, actually in the individual fisheries. Taking up the point of technology, there is no way we can stop the fishermen from using modern technology. What we have got to do is stop it wiping out the stocks."

On the international dimensions of the CFP, Roger Barton, a Billingsgate trader, noted that "charity begins at home", and that we should protect our (UK) waters from foreign interests. David Godbold, a Thames fisherman, further noted that "exclusive rights of the users" was an important issue and that small-scale fisheries, such as the one he operates in, is being overwhelmed by 'nomadic fishing'. According to him, "This is undertaken by large scale fishing vessels which circumnavigate the British Isles under all types of flags taking the communities' livelihoods away. I have been fishing for 35 years and nomadic fishing is a huge problem."

The EU's fisheries agreements also came in for some criticism. According to Austin Mitchell, developing country fisheries are now "threatened by the industrialized world's obsession with commercial fisheries. In Europe, we are actually making that situation worse. The fishing agreements signed by the EEC with several developing countries, particularly in Africa, are used to subsidize the European fishing industry, and do not aid

A Livelihood from Fishing

A report from the Billingsgate Book launch is available from Brian O'Riordan, Intermediate Technology, Schumacher Centre for Technology and Development, Bourton Hall, Bourton on Dunsmore, Warks CV23 9QZ., UK. Copies of Alain le Sann's book, *A Livelihood from Fishing*, are available from IT Publications at a cost of £10.29. Contact Guy Benthams by email: orders@itpubs.org.uk, fax: ++44 171 436 2013, or by writing to IT Publications, 103-105 Southampton Row, London WC1B4HH.

development in those countries concerned. Big vessels, particularly Spanish vessels, are going in and decimating their stocks under these agreements.”

Euan Dunn of RSPB (Bird Life International) was impressed by the huge amount of fish on the market from overseas fisheries: “In fact, about 50 per cent of the fish that we eat in the UK now comes from abroad. A very high proportion of this is brought in by the bilateral fishing agreements mentioned, which represent, in a sense, quota hopping on an international scale. They are also causing a huge amount of environmental damage to the coastal environment. Could I ask Brian O’Riordan what progress is being made towards a Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries?”

Brian O’Riordan replied that he felt that the proposed FAO Code of Conduct seemed like “a voice crying in the wilderness! When it comes to fishing agreements, for some reason, these are viewed as commercial arrangements between governments (and not subject to any code). What I don’t understand is how governments can get away with entering into so-called commercial arrangements, which effectively subsidize their own fishing fleets to fish in other people’s waters, and which, as you say, are a kind of quota hopping.”

Andrew George noted, “Under the EU, we still do have an opportunity to influence and try to improve opportunities for people in other parts of the world. Particularly for the Senegalese, for example, through the EU, we actually have the opportunity to re-define the expression ‘charity begins at home.’ Charity begins at home, but it doesn’t end there, and we need to be working both within Britain and internationally to ensure that we promote the message that Intermediate Technology has very aptly presented to us today.”

Rene-Pierre Chever, representing Alain Le Sann and the NGO *Peche et Developpement*, took this issue a step further. Quoting from Alain Le Sann, he said, “What is needed today is a more global approach to fisheries, an approach which addresses quality of life and working conditions, as well as the protection of the marine environment and coastal areas. A purely economic approach will not safeguard our fisheries, when the environment is being destroyed and young people are leaving the sector.

Increasing support

Rather than increasing support to the sector, we need to find ways of reallocating it to encourage more responsible fisheries which employ more fishermen. It is totally wrong for European tax payers to be financing such plundering operations, as the Senegalese

are having to put up with in their pelagic fisheries, or that the Argentineans are having to put up with in their hake fishery.”

Translation power

He further noted that “the considerable work we put into writing this book could never have the impact it may yield, had it not been translated into English. We would like to thank Intermediate Technology very much for this. The essence of the book is that there is an essential humanism embodied in the culture and way of life of people who live from fishing. This is something that has got to be asserted in such a book which can be read widely.”



This report has been filed by Brian Q' Riordan of intermediate Technology, UK and a member of ICSF.