

Fisheries management

No to quotas, yes to licences

Linking the licence to fish to individual vessels of specified capacity could help to sustain the European Union's inshore fisheries

Britain, once described as an island of coal surrounded by fish, has, in recent years, seen both its fishing and mining industries decimated. In the 1980s, the Conservative government under Margaret Thatcher effectively dismantled Britain's mining industry—a traditional and historic sector which supported thousands of livelihoods and scores of communities.

In the 1990s, the fishing industry in the UK faces similar prospects. The decline can be traced back over several decades. In 1938, there were 38,000 full-time fishermen in the UK; today, there are 14,000. Fish stocks, taken as a whole, are lower than they have ever been. One way out of the crisis would be to do away with quotas and, instead, develop and introduce a new system of licences.

Those opposed to UK membership of the European Union (EU) have taken up the cause of British fishermen with gusto. According to them, the Common Fisheries Policy has handed 'our' fish to greedy and rapacious European fishing fleets. Honest British fishermen are the only ones to abide by the rules, and are being squeezed out of the industry. While our boats are being burned by order of Brussels, Spanish vessels are lining up to fish right up to British beaches.

The truth is a little different. Mismanagement of the UK industry for 20 years has seen an unnecessary decline in both employment and fish stocks. By accepting the pain of cuts in vessel numbers several years ago, countries such as Spain are now taking advantage of restructuring funds denied to the UK because we failed to implement similar policies at the same time. The Common Fisheries Policy has undoubtedly failed in many respects, and requires substantial

revision, but it is not the cause of all our ills.

You do not need to look too deeply at the fishing industry to realize that a select bunch of people are making vast sums of money very quickly. Every week, the fishing press contains announcements about another multimillion pound vessel leaving a boatyard with ever more sophisticated electronic gadgetry designed to find fish faster and more efficiently. These vessels need to land ever larger amounts of fish to pay for bank loans, expenses and the deposits for the next, larger, vessel that will be ordered in three years time.

This fish can come in two ways—it can be 'bought' from other fishermen, or the fish can be landed illegally. It is no longer a secret that in some ports on the northern edges of Britain, over 40 per cent of landings are those of the latter category. These so-called 'black fish' find their way down to larger processors in England, causing a drop in auction prices. Fishermen in smaller boats, unable to catch more to compensate for the drop in price, are the inevitable losers in the game, along with the fish themselves.

While some people seem to be finding ways to turn the Common Fisheries Policy to their benefit, by fair means or foul, many fishermen in the small boats sector find themselves losing out.

Fishery closed

For example, last December, the UK Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (MAFF) calculated that the UK quota of English Channel plaice had been taken, and ordered the fishery closed. The quota was for vessels under 33 feet, which, up to 1 January, had to throw back any plaice they caught (as by-catch).

For the small beach boats that rely on this stock, such as the historic fleet at Hastings, it was not a good Christmas. The fleet is already in decline and, at best, 'marginally viable. The sad thing is that the demise of these small beach boats has a minimal effect on the stocks of fish that are most affected by a fewer number of much larger offshore vessels. The result of the current system of managing our fish stocks is that fishermen are being reduced faster than the stock of fish.

A review of the Common Fisheries Policy has to be undertaken by the end of 2001, and many of the current derogations to the open-access principle (such as the 6- and 12-mile limits) will be evaluated. It is likely that this review will recommend some fundamental changes (and these derogations may be lifted).

Already, the debate has started on what changes should be made to it. The European Commission is at present consulting stakeholders, and it is to be hoped that those representing smaller vessels will make their views known and be listened to. My own view is that the quota system should be scrapped.

It has failed to protect stocks, has alienated fishermen, reduced the accuracy of research and disrupted markets. Politicians like quotas as they are an easy way of maintaining national shares of a

stock, but politicians do not rely on fishing for their livelihoods.

A licensing scheme, weighted to take account of local priorities, could be devised to be phased in as the CIT is renewed. This would use market forces to ensure both commercial and biological success of stocks, could largely eliminate any threat to the industry from the environmental movement, and would halt the decline in employment that the fishing industry has suffered over the last 50 years.

The present licensing system, whereby licences with no legal value are being traded at ever more exorbitant prices, is concentrating quota and tonnage in a diminishing number of hands. Rule breakers, be they 'blacking' fish or under-reporting engine capacity, can afford to pay the highest prices for further licences, increasing pressure on those operating within the system.

Expanded capacity

The smaller vessels that do least damage to stocks and employ two-thirds of the UK's fishermen, suffer when quotas are reduced because of the antics of these larger vessels that have expanded their catching capacity. A case in point is the South West Hand-line Fishermen's Association (SWHFA), an association of some 500 fishermen operating smallboats in the inshore mackerel fishery around

Devon and Cornwall. Their quota for 1997 was so small that the fishery was closed early when they had used up all their quota. Thanks to quota transfers from the large pelagic sector, members of the SWHFA were able to continue fishing until the end of the year.

How, then, would charges for licences reverse the decline in employment and stocks, and restore a measure of profitability to the hardest pressed segments of our fleet? A new system could be introduced which would allocate the right to fish to a specific vessel and gear combination. Skippers would apply for an entitlement to fish with a particular vessel, specifying the types and the specifications of the gear to be used, hold capacities, horsepower, etc. An entitlement to fish within a certain fishery would then be provided, and the licences would only allow a fixed quantum of effort for the named vessel.

Easily managed and enforced catches within this restriction would be unlimited. Permission would be required before fitting updated equipment that increased catching capacity in any way. The absurdity of the closure of the Cornish hand-line fishery or the under-10 m plaice and sole fisheries would never again be seen.

The removal of the common right to fish should mean that those no longer allowed to fish should be entitled, via some form of government or management body, to pay for the privilege to enter a restricted fishery. The money obtained should be used not only to contribute towards the cost of management and enforcement, but should go into the coastal communities historically dependent on the stock. This could be used for compensation, job creation or training for those choosing to leave the fishery.

Once priorities for a local fishery are decided, licence costs could be weighted to reflect the effect of a particular vessel on that fishery. A longliner, for example, capable of landing 100 tonnes of top-quality fish, with zero discards and by-catch, would pay significantly less than a trawler with the same catching capability. A beam trawler using twice as

much fuel per tonne of fish landed, as well as destroying the seabed and employing fewer fishermen, would have to pay correspondingly more. Once the system had been established, the greatest bugbear of our industry—quotas—could be abolished. Policing would still be required, of course, to stop abuses of the system such as has taken place with the 'de-rated' engines in sectors at the larger end of the fleet, but overall costs of enforcement would be greatly reduced.

Without quotas, there would be no reason to cheat on logbooks; the number of fisheries officers required would be reduced and the statistics that the scientists use would become much more reliable.

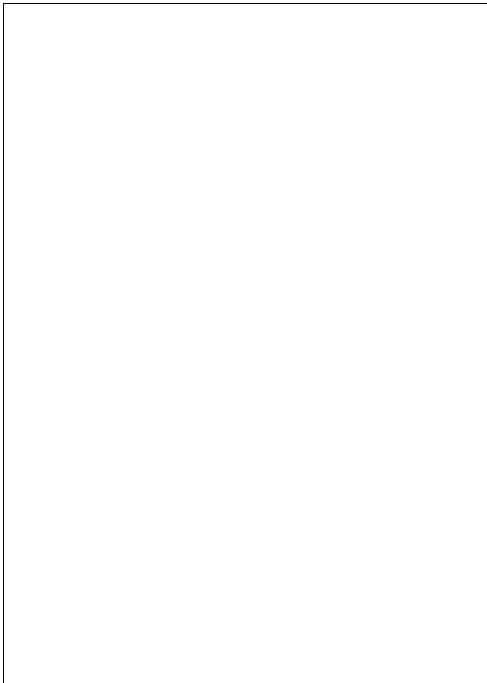
It is inevitable that a great deal of rationalization would occur in any fishery subject to such a system. This could be catered for. Those who had spent large amounts of money on the open market investing in quota or licences would need compensation; an effective capacity reduction programme that could not subsequently be overtaken by technology would be required if effort control was to be avoided. Owners would still be able to upgrade their vessels, but their licence charge would be increased to reflect the extra profitability they could expect to achieve.

Such a scheme would inevitably lead to an outcry, which would have to be addressed by phasing in licence fees gradually, and by announcing details of the scheme several years in advance. Once in place, charging structures could be set so that market forces gradually caused vessels to change to low-impact, high-employment methods of fishing.

Large, highly efficient vessels would remain in areas such as North Norway and Rockall, but there would be a market force in favour of a shift towards more traditional fishing practices elsewhere. The days of owners using 'black fish' money to pay for larger vessels, which, in turn, need ever larger amounts of 'black fish' to sustain them, would be over.

Patent failure

One reason for the patent failure of the attempts to manage our fisheries has been




the lack of support, or outright hostility, of fishermen themselves.

As it became evident that licence charges would allow the majority of vessels to become more profitable, support of the majority of thinking and honest fishermen would make it a simple matter to isolate those breaking the rules.

Those caught would not be able to renew their licences. Once it became clear that in a depleted fishery, effort control would be introduced, it would be in the interests of all those in the fishery to bring to heel those responsible for the depletion.

Government, unshackled from costly enforcement of quota restrictions, could place on vessels a greater number of observers who, concerned only with compliance with technical measures, would be free to collect more, and better quality, data on which to base further, better-informed management decisions.

Our industry is at a crossroads. In the lead up to 2002, we have a choice—carry on with a system that will make millionaires of a few and paupers of many, or have the guts to go for a system that will maintain the diversity of fisheries that sustain our coastal communities. 

This piece, based on an article that first appeared in *Fishing News* in February 1998, is by Andy Read, who was Assistant Chief Executive of the National Federation of Fishermen's Organizations during 1996-97. The views expressed in this article are entirely personal.