

Breton fisheries

No more bounty

The artisanal offshore fishing fleet of Brittany is now in jeopardy, but can still be saved

One interesting aspect of Breton fisheries has been the development of an artisanal offshore fleet based on trawling. Artisanal refers to the independent, owner-on-board, single-vessel enterprise. This sector expanded after the World War II to reach a peak in the 1980s. In the early 1990s, a crisis which had been brewing since the previous decade, suddenly broke out violently, and deeply undermined that attractive model. In the face of the new challenges thrown up — mostly dwindling resources and appropriation of traditional markets/niches and also fishing grounds by capitalistic concerns — stakeholders must now review its functioning, if the artisanal model is to last.

During the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, Breton fisheries were basically seasonal operations, targeting sardines and tuna. A host of owner-operated boats was responsible for the production that went mostly for processing. Plant owners were, by and large, the people in command. During the early part of the 19th century, the dominance of these people was progressively challenged by a number of factors — resource crisis, relocation of plants, and new demands by consumers. Before the World War II, some industrialists had already started redeploying their assets and investing in large trawlers to produce fresh fish. Lorient fishing harbour, built in 1927, was at the forefront of that evolution. When the war broke out, things came to a standstill.

At the end of the conflict, a number of entrepreneurs started anew with industrial trawlers harvesting fresh fish. Over the years, many canneries closed down and those which survived now

worked all year round. There were fewer outlets for the artisans who were also in the process of changing from sailing to mecanized operations. The order of the day was trawling and fresh fish, and the extended continental shelf easily provided new grounds.

During the war, which lasted five years, fish stocks were plenty enough to cater for new tastes. Demand was high on markets where, for a long time, food supplies had been rather modest. This kept prices going up steadily. Later on, fish prices would again remain bullish, thanks to rising purchasing power. Indeed, until the end of the 1980s, the price curve stayed above the rate of inflation. These favorable conditions made it easier for the pêcheurs artisans previously engaged in seasonal activities to turn to year-round trawling and fresh-fish production.

Some would take up several métiers (type of boat+fishing methods+fish targeted), particularly when there was renewed interest in albacore tuna fishing with drift-nets in the late 1980s. In spite of prevailing inflationary trends, artisanal fishermen could not have made it alone to offshore fishing, had it not been for the co-operative movement (in management, credit, insurance and marketing) which brought extra dynamism among them and propelled them into the high seas.

Renewed access

The industrial sector too was able to move further afield as the establishment of a common fishery zone within the European Economic Community (EEC) superseded the EEZs and offered renewed access to British waters. In Brittany, the artisanal sector and its institutions had some political leverage which could affect decisions at the national level. Large subsidies were made available for young

potential patrons (owners-operators) to step in and start business or for established skippers to modernize the fleet.

With only 10 per cent of the initial capital to be put up personally, a young qualified person could thus skipper a state-of-the-art fishing unit. The artisanal offshore fleet reached an apex during the 1980s. Its deep imprint is more visible in the fishing harbours of Southern Brittany. Le Guilvinec quartier maritime (administrative district) is the showcase of this model, which presents a well balanced array of métiers and segments of fleet, from the small inshore boat to the 20-24 m high sea unit. The pêcheurs artisans were proving their ability to operate right across the continental shelf.

But there is a dark side to the rosy story as well. The limits of the model started showing up when prices and landings took a downward trend. In 1993-1994, there were two violent outbursts of protests on the part of fishermen. The first hint of things to come appeared as early as 1985. Within the artisanal sector, the problem was, for quite some time, less apparent because new fishing practices (twin-trawling) and new technologies (electronics on board) helped keep catches at former levels — at a cost, though.

From 1985 to 1990, prices went up, and that compensated for the decline of catches and rising operating costs (despite fairly low fuel prices). But when fish prices plummeted, the stark realities of

overinvestment appeared glaringly. Many boatowners were no longer able to meet their loan instalments or pay the crew. Le Guilvinec district was the worst off. Out of a total of 338 persons who applied to the authorities for debt rescheduling/relief, 130 were from that area. And the crisis affected offshore boats as well as small coastal units.

One should not put the blame for overinvestment on the artisanal fishermen alone. Some of the policies implemented by the EEC were, to a large extent, also responsible. Indeed, from 1970 to 1995, captures by French boats in the Northeast Atlantic dropped from 505,800 tonnes to 297,300 tonnes.

During the same period, Irish fisheries, with substantial aid from the EEC, were able to jump from 75, 000 tonnes to 377, 000 tonnes. In addition, Spanish, Dutch and Belgian boats would also congregate there. Surely, the Breton pêcheurs artisans were not the only ones around unleashing their fishing capacities. They paid dearly, though, for the bountiful days of the 1980s.

The majority survived the deep crisis and a good number of the boats with seemingly intractable problems were taken over by a co-operative society (Océane).

Critical times

But these critical times had also allowed industrial fishing companies (owning from 5 to 20 boats) to lay their hands on some of the larger (16-24 m) artisanal

Total fish captures (tonnes)

	1970	1980	1997
France	78 827	52 025	57 126
Ireland	28 897	20 010	70291
uk (England & Wales)	759	2 708	44 621
uk (Scotland)	0	311	11 208
Total	108 480	74 746	183 246
Total (all countries)	223 325	146 219	331 014

Source : ICES

boats. This trend is accelerating, so much so that the artisanal offshore fleet is now in danger.

The market for seafood products is thriving and the traders, distributors and industrialists who are still in business are increasingly eyeing fresh fish. A young potential patron has to acquire the necessary fishing capacity from within a limited quota. He must, therefore, find a second-hand boat, whose owner is about to retire, for instance, before ever thinking of buying a new one. On the second-hand market, prices have rocketed and only the better-off companies can afford such investments and corner whatever fishing capacity that comes for sale. As they acquire boats that fall within the technical criteria (up to 25 m) of artisanal units, they may even qualify for subsidies meant to support that sector.

What can a young patron do, even with the help of co-operative structures, when he is facing competition from retailing giants like Intermarché, whose turnover is 230 billion FF, or even from Furic, an industrial fishing company with a turnover of 600 million FF. Since access to fishing capacity has become so highly competitive, there is a rampant privatization of access to the resource, in spite of proclamations to the contrary in the Loi d'orientation sur la pêche maritime et les cultures marines

(Framework law on fisheries and aquaculture) passed by the French Parliament in November 1997.

The artisanal sector has, in the past, demonstrated its ability to operate throughout the continental shelf. The industrial sector, with a clearly different status, has also suffered from the crisis. The two were undergoing a restructuring process along separate lines. They had their own financial/banking systems and their own pool of fishing capacity. Today, though, the industrial sector has massively surged into the artisanal offshore segment—and this is sending shock waves right down to the smallest coastal unit. Industrialists are now gazing at the nephrops (*langoustine*) and sardine coastal fisheries.

The attractive model that had been painstakingly established by the *patrons-pêcheurs* is now threatened by the mighty push of capitalistic concerns. The only way out, if indeed there is a will to salvage what is left of the artisanal sector, is to set up a licensing system for close-to-shore fisheries, with one-owner/operator-one boat rule. This is a political choice. Politicians, who dispense aid and subsidies, could surely take that course, if only they wish to!

Sound management

Preservation of the artisanal sector also depends on sound management of

resource and proper use of gear and technologies. Managing fishing grounds targeted by a variety of boats coming from a variety of member States is no easy task.

The *pêcheurs artisans* of Brittany could at least demonstrate their will and capacity to manage the areas where they are the sole operators, the nephrops stocks of the Bay of Biscay being a case in point. The resource and the grounds are well defined.

Until now, whenever they experienced a drop in the yield, they would intensify the fishing effort. Attempts have been made to limit by-catches and these will have to be carried out more forcefully. *Langoustine* production has decreased by half, but with responsible management measures it could be back to better levels. Aid and subsidies schemes should now integrate these objectives.

In the past, subsidies towards capital investments have heavily encouraged overinvestment and have gone far beyond the original aim, which was helping young skippers to get into business on their own. Subsidies should also be made conditional on improvement of fishing practices, for instance. This, in the long term, could create favourable conditions for a more stable future.

Companies and investors are keen to bank on artisanal boats. This is ample proof that there is still a future for that sector, and one must now look for the ways and means to preserve it, to adapt and reform it in order to steer clear of the unsound developments that went with years of prosperity.

The *pêcheurs artisans* of Brittany have been able to operate right across the width of the continental shelf. Their experience may prove valuable to coastal fishermen worldwide who want to expand their fishing grounds.

Let us hope that a sufficient number of men and women, fishermen and politicians, gather to meet the challenges of the day so that the criteria of responsible fishery are implemented by coastal and offshore artisanal units alike.

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