

The effects of overcapacity on fishing communities

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For a number of years the Commission has declared that there are “*Too many boats chasing too few fish*” This, it argues is the reason that some stocks of commercially important fish have collapsed. We perceive the problem differently but in broad agreement with the Commissions view. It is actually overcapacity that is the problem, not number of vessels. In fact we have the opportunity during the reform of the CFP to not only address the problem of declining fish stocks but also to greatly improve the socio-economic benefits of fishing to coastal communities around Europe. To achieve this would mean a fundamental change in mindset as to how we exploit our marine resources. As Commercial fishermen we (as European Fishermen) have gone way too far ahead of what the sea can produce. A step back is what is needed. I will try to explain in simple terms. One large twin rigged trawler pulling two thirty fathom nets is actually catching more than four smaller boats using one fifteen fathom net each. These smaller boats were the norm, certainly in the Irish Sea. It may be pulling a similar amount of net but the twin-rigged boat is usually pulling it faster than the lighter more fuel-efficient boats. Therefore catching more. One retired fisherman told me that in his opinion the Irish Sea was finished the day they let the twin-riggers in.

The trend towards larger twin-rigged trawlers has meant that where there were four boats and crews making a living from fishing now there is one large boat and one crew. Often this has been facilitated by the fact that official landing ports are restricted to just a few along each coast. Previously there were many boats

landing in many ports and employing a great many people often in remote parts of the country. Enforcement could possibly be addressed by having more fishery Officers or more training of harbour masters. Where previously the many boats making a living were owner operated, now we have a position where often one individual or family can own several large boats and employ crew. Coastal communities are being deprived the socio-economic benefit of having boats located and landing fish into their home ports. We have seen that often it is cheaper to employ foreign crew from non-EU countries, who will work for much less than Irish crew. In our experience these crews often come from non-EU countries and come untrained but willing, leading to safety issues. This also applies because of language difficulties. But owners are now running fishing boats not to make a living, but to get rich and they are big business. The fact that these large boats need large engines to pull the massive gear also means that they are doing more damage to the benthos than smaller vessels pulling smaller lighter nets. These big engines consume vast amounts of fuel and because the fuel bill of up to 20,000 Euro per trip must be paid off before any crew gets paid means that the crews and skippers can be under pressure to deliver. The fact that the crews and skippers can be in fear of their jobs, can mean that they can be prepared to take risks and can be tempted to act outside the regulations. A return to the position of many smaller lighter boats making a living for their crews and landing around the coasts could help coastal communities retain their seafaring traditions and regain the livelihoods lost to the few who can obtain the necessary loans to buy the big vessels.

Regarding stocks, the smaller boats could more easily adopt to the use of Technical Conservation Measures, which we believe should be mandatory for all trawlers, because they are by their very nature non-selective.

For stock to recover, we have argued at RAC meetings since 2006 that trawlers should be excluded from spawning and nursery grounds to allow juvenile stocks to mature. Certain proven

selective methods such as hand lining, angling and creeling/potting could still operate within these areas. Creeling for Nephrops cannot operate where trawling is practised. The possibility of an exclusion zone, or zones, for trawlers should be considered (we would suggest either a depth, or distance from shore, to protect the juvenile fish). Every reputable scientist who has examined the issues has agreed that we need to act without delay and need to take what might seem drastic measures to prevent a total collapse of both fish stocks and as a result the entire fishing industry. We believe that the Commission should already be in the process of investigating other opportunities for fishermen. Alternatives exist which would still make use of the skills they possess, farmers have had to investigate ways to diversify and there are many opportunities on the seas from niche markets to Eco-tourism. This reform of the CFP presents the perfect opportunity to prove the pessimists wrong. We can restore fish stocks and coastal communities can make a living from the sea in a sustainable manner. But we must act now!

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