

Misplaced machismo

***Atlantic Dawn* must surely be the biggest, baddest and most brazenly illegal supertrawler yet**

The poor state of the world's fishery resources, together with the related problems of fishing overcapacity and overinvestment, are matters of serious concern. Over the last two years, the United Nations, through its Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) has been trying to persuade the world's fishing nations to develop and sign up to a number of "Global Plans of Action" (GPOAs). Two of these specifically address the related problems of fishing overcapacity, and Illegal, Unregulated and Unreported (IUU) fishing activities (essentially flags of convenience by another name).

In Europe, since 1990, the European Commission has been trying to persuade Community Member States to agree to capacity reduction targets, and thus bring fishing effort into line with available resources. In Spain, a nation heavily dependent on distant-water fishing, some 600 vessels have been laid up since November 1999 due to a hiatus in the fishing agreement with Morocco. Like other nations, Morocco would like to see that its own economy and population be the first to benefit from its fishery resources. What then is the future for this idle Spanish fishing capacity, for the fishermen, their families, and the associated fishery sector enterprises? Should they be considered to be part of the European fishing fleet, or not? Is it right for the European Union (EU) to distinguish between the fleets that fish in its waters and those that fish in distant waters? What kind of regulations and provisions should govern EU fleet size at home and abroad? These are the kinds of questions facing the EU in the review of its Common Fisheries Policy, a review that will attempt to rationalize and integrate the four policy strands of Conservation, Fleet Structure, Markets, and International Relations.

In such a context, it is surprising to find that the world's largest and most powerful fishing vessels are being constructed in European countries, first in Holland and now in Ireland—built primarily not to fish in their own waters, but to fish stocks in other countries' waters. Like the supertrawler pack spawned by the Dutch Pelagic Fishing Company over the last two years, the *Atlantic Dawn* has been built on the same Klondike prospecting mentality that spurred the Gold Rush: invest now whilst stocks last! Hardly a sustainable approach to fisheries!

In Ireland, it seems to be a matter of national pride that the owner of the world's latest and largest supertrawler is Irish. The *Atlantic Dawn* is reputed to be the biggest and most powerful in a trio of "140 m-plus new-generation pelagic freezer stern trawlers being put into service this year" (*Fishing News*, 15 September 2001), and Kevin McHugh, a well known Irish businessman, is the proud owner.

Press reports estimate that more than 100,000 people visited Dublin port to marvel at the size of this fishing giant, whilst on the West Coast, traffic queues 15 miles long built up outside the port of Killybegs as people flocked to see the ship.

Proud moment?

VIP visitors included the Irish Taoiseach (Prime Minister) Bertie Ahern and Fisheries Minister Frank Fahey. According to *Fishing News*, Minister Fahey proclaimed, "This is one of the proudest moments for the Irish fishing industry. Kevin (McHugh) is the epitome of its finest fishermen, leading at the forefront, and taking steps into the unknown." Whilst the vessel itself may be a marvel of modern times, "the steps being taken into

the unknown”, referred to by Minister Fahey, are a matter of grave concern.

It is also a matter of grave concern that alongside national pride, the smirking face of “*Might is Right*” fishing machismo is all too apparent. In Europe, as in so many other parts of the world, fishing machismo is elbowing all other voices out of its way. Vast profits, mega-catches, the most powerful modern industrial technologies, and the most efficient catching techniques are being promoted (and subsidized) as the only way forward for the fishing industry. Never mind all the evidence that most of the world’s fish stocks and fishing grounds are now unsustainable.

At 144 m long, *Atlantic Dawn* is the largest and potentially the most destructive fishing machine in the world. It will use two of the least selective fishing techniques known to mankind: pelagic trawling and purse seining. The purse seine alone is reputed to be more than 3,600 ft in circumference and over 550 ft deep (large enough to engulf two London Millennium Domes!).

The ship’s processing ability (to freeze 300 tonnes of fish a day) and storage capacity (7,000 tonnes of frozen fish) are staggering: in one day, *Atlantic Dawn* can process as much fish as several large African canoes can catch in one year of good fishing!

And as for subsidies, the £50 mn plus investment has received the equivalent of at least £3-4 mn (44 mn Norwegian kroner) in subsidies provided by the Norwegian government to the shipbuilding company, Umoe Sterkoder. There is also the issue of subsidized fishing access, discussed below, where EU taxpayers contribute the equivalent of some US\$ 200 mn annually to secure access rights for the overcapacity of the European fleet in distant waters.

As far as the steps into the unknown are concerned, there are indeed a great many unanswered questions surrounding this and other recent supertrawler ventures in Europe. Hence, the embarrassed and almost deafening silence of the Irish fishing sector. Some have raised the issue of Article 4—the well-known Irish

loophole to avoid planning restrictions using a “build first, ask questions later” approach. By adopting this approach, operators shift the onus from themselves onto the national authorities to justify their investments, often using obliging officials and clever lawyers.

It seems that McHugh’s venture has been built outside any legal framework for new fishing vessel construction in Europe. Even before it rolled off the production line in Norway, the *Atlantic Dawn* is said to have had its registration numbers painted on its hull. And yet, despite having this Irish registration, *Atlantic Dawn* does not form part of the legal Irish fleet with permission to fish in EU waters. To do this, it would have to comply with the strict EU regulations on fishing capacity that demand that all fishing vessels form part of agreed Multi-Annual Guidance Programmes (MAGPs). *Atlantic Dawn* does not.

So, if *Atlantic Dawn* is not allowed to fish in Europe, where can it fish? This is now a burning question that EU and Irish government officials must concern themselves with. Whilst *Atlantic Dawn* is currently reputed to be fishing in Mauritanian waters under a private agreement negotiated through the Dutch Pelagic Fishing Company, its future prospects are likely to depend on the subsidized access agreements negotiated by the EU with third countries, using European taxpayers’ monies. And if these agreements should fail, then it is the unsuspecting European and Irish taxpayers who will again have to bail out McHugh’s investment.

No legal basis

But if, under European rules, vessels like the *Atlantic Dawn* are not legally entitled to fish in European waters, is it responsible of European nations to allow the construction of such vessels to fish in other nations waters? And what should the role of the Commission be towards such vessels when negotiating access rights to third country waters through fisheries agreements? Is it right for third country fishery agreements to provide a legal loophole and safety valve for fishing sector investors like Kevin McHugh? Also, the issue of whether or not *Atlantic Dawn* forms part of the Irish tonnage is a

burning issue with regard to access rights in European waters, where the Dutch supertrawlers are already fishing for herring and mackerel. The unsuspecting Irish pelagic fishing sector may also find itself fishing in *Atlantic Dawn's* shadow, and perhaps flying not an Irish but a Dutch flag! That would add a new dimension to quota hopping!

As far as the future is concerned, until mid-2001, the EU has the possibilities to deploy up to 22 vessels fishing for pelagic species in Mauritanian waters. Currently, there are six Dutch vessels taking advantage of these licences. In addition, countries from the former Soviet Union (FSU) have an agreement with Mauritania for 50 vessels to fish the pelagic stocks in these waters.

The collapse of the Russian distant-water fleet in West African waters in the early 1990s opened up fishing possibilities for others. Hence, the 1996 EU Mauritanian fisheries agreement, and the spate of European supertrawler construction that has ensued since.

Whilst the vacuum created by the departure of the FSU opened up possibilities, given the efficiency of modern technology, these possibilities do have considerable limits. For example, it is estimated that the effective fishing capacity of modern pelagic supertrawlers is, on average, five times that of the

previous generation of pelagic trawlers in the FSU. On this basis, the six Dutch supertrawlers fishing in Mauritanian waters under EU licences are equivalent to 30 old FSU vessels! With the return of up to 50 modern vessels from the FSU, and with giants like *Atlantic Dawn* heading for West African waters, just what are the prospects for sustainability?

Sardinelle are the main species of small pelagics targeted by the EU supertrawlers in these West African waters. These are shared stocks that migrate between the waters of Morocco, Mauritania, Senegal and countries further South. In recent years, the total annual catch of sardinelle is estimated to have increased from 300,000 tonnes (in the early 1990s) to more than 500,000 tonnes.

A significant part (estimated to be more than 300,000 tonnes) of this is taken by the artisanal fleets (mainly Senegalese), for whom sardinelle is the basic "bread and butter".

Vital access

Such species form the backbone of the highly dynamic artisanal fishing sector, providing the raw material for important fish processing and trading enterprises. Access to such fish resources is, therefore, vital to the local fishing economy, to traditional livelihoods, and to food supplies in Senegal and other West African coastal States.

A further 150,000 tonnes of sardinelle is estimated to be taken by the EU's supertrawler fleet. The Dutch have indicated that they hope to increase annual catches up to 300,000 tonnes. They further claim that their activities help rather than hinder fish supplies in fish-eating West African countries: "catching fish where there are no fishermen, and supplying it to where there is not enough fish". However, such a claim is highly questionable. The marketing of low-cost, industrially caught fish in West African countries competes directly with the market for local, artisanally caught fish, and establishes marketing outlets totally dependent on imports. Again, hardly a sustainable approach to fishing and food supplies.

Given the fragility of these pelagic resources, and their tendency for large fluctuations, the build-up of a large industrial fishery in the region represents a serious threat to sustainability. And when the collapse comes, where will these giants move to? The South Pacific, off Chile? The South Atlantic, the Indian Ocean, or back to Europe? Whose fishery is next on the chopping block?

In such a context, the question also arises about who should have priority access to these rich, highly sought-after but fragile resources: a foreign fishing fleet catching fish for the international market, or the local artisanal fleet, supplying local

processing industries, providing thousands of jobs, and meeting local food needs? All logic and all international fishing conventions highlight the need for precaution and sustainability, and the protection of access rights for local, small-scale coastal fishing communities.

Is this how Ireland would like the rest of the world to see it—an international quota-hopping Robber Baron? 🐙

This personal perspective, derived from various sources, comes from Brian O'Riordan, Secretary, ICSF Brussels office