

Don't Miss the Point

The reform of the European Union's Common Fisheries Policy must be radical but nuanced and seen not as a problem of the number of boats, but one of approach

Rightly perhaps, the proposed fisheries policy reform of the European Union (EU) takes ecological sustainability as a basic premise for the economic and social future of European fisheries. The European Commission's Green Paper on the reform of the Common Fisheries Policy (CFP) sees the problem as one of overfished stocks combined with fishing fleets that are too large for the available resources (see "Blue Europe Turns Green", page 23). "This combination means that too many vessels chase too few fish", it states. This is not the first time such a conclusion has been reached. The 2002 review and reform process concluded much the same.

But by equating overcapacity with "too many vessels", and the overfishing problem with "too few fish", the EU is missing the point. In recent years, while vessel numbers have declined by 20 to 30 per cent, the actual fishing capacity of the EU fleet (measured in tonnage and horsepower) has reduced by considerably less. This implies that smaller, less powerful vessels have gone, leaving behind fewer, larger and more powerful vessels.

Capacity is not just a problem of too many boats, but one of how, when and where fishing is done. It is a combination of size, power, fishing technology and other factors. It includes the use of unselective and environmentally destructive gear, and of management measures that promote waste by discarding over-quota and lower-value fish, and inadvertently cause the degradation of fishing grounds and key fisheries habitats.

Sufficiently radical reform is unlikely to be achieved through management based on individually tradable rights, as suggested in the Green Paper. This invariably leads to concentration of ownership, and encourages illegal and unreported fishing, resulting in inequitable leasing arrangements and deteriorating working conditions.

Rather than just a stick to beat down vessel numbers, what is needed is more carrot to encourage

responsible and sustainable practices. This would include providing priority access to fishing operations that comply with responsible and sustainable criteria. In essence, this would mean favouring operators with a history of compliance, and encouraging activities based on low-impact and selective fishing methods, which have lower energy use, a smaller carbon footprint, and decent working conditions (as established by the standards of the International Labour Organization), and which deliver high-quality products.

Such an approach needs to be applied within EU waters as well as in the distant waters where EU fleets operate and where the EU has influence—both on the access of its fleet to third-country waters through fisheries partnership agreements (FPAs), and

to its negotiating stance within regional fisheries management organizations (RFMOs). It is also vital that fleets currently fishing in Europe must not be allowed to add to overcapacity problems in distant waters, as in West African and international waters in the southeast Pacific (see "The Thievery of Fish", page 33).

The EU tuna fleet, in particular, requires reform, especially to reduce overcapacity in line with new realities. The EU fleet must make way for developing countries in the respective regions that have the right to build up socially, environmentally and economically sustainable tuna fishing.

Consumption patterns in Europe must change too, so that consumers eat less, but higher-quality fishery products provided through equitable commercial channels. A level playing field must also be established in the way non-tariff barriers, like sanitary and food standards, are applied to fishery products originating from EU fleets, and those from third-country fleets, particularly from small-scale fleets in the South.

In sum, it is not so much a case of too many boats chasing too few fish, but of too much fishing of the wrong kind.

