

Common-property fishing rights

Redistributing wealth

The use of Individual Transferable Quotas as a resource management measure must not be summarily dismissed

Parzival Copes' arguments against the use of Individual Transferable Quotas (ITQs) for the management of fisheries ("Coastal resources for whom?", SAMUDRA Report No. 23, September 1999) are not particularly helpful to those responsible for making decisions on the formulation of management measures. Although ITQs will not work in many situations, they, nevertheless, provide an important tool which should not be rejected for the wrong reasons.

It is abundantly evident that overfishing is becoming more severe and more pervasive throughout the world and that it affects small-scale fisheries as much as it does large-scale fisheries. The basic problem is that the supply of fish stocks is limited and yet the demand for fish products is growing. This leads to rising prices and, in the absence of effective controls, increased fishing effort. The result is the depletion of stocks as well as the excessive use of capital and labour.

Better management of fisheries is essential. Management measures can deal either solely with the biological aspects or with both biological and economic aspects. In the past, many of the measures dealt only with the biological yield, ignoring the economic consequences. These kinds of measures included total catch limits, closed seasons, closed areas, mesh size controls and others designed to restore stocks to their maximum sustainable yields (MSY). These were frequently adopted because they presumably affected all fishermen equally and did not change the distribution of wealth (a presumption that was often wrong).

Although such measures may be desirable in conjunction with other measures, they

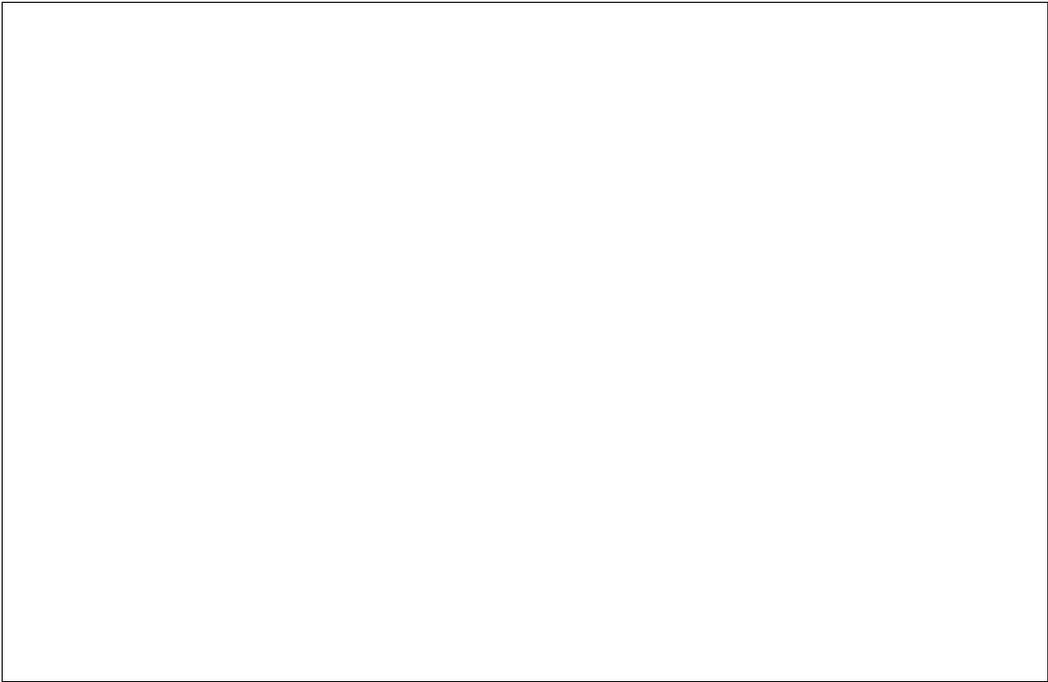
do not always achieve their objective of restoring the stocks. Moreover, they do nothing to prevent excessive fishing effort or conflict among competing users. The difficulty is that measures that prevent excessive fishing effort or that deal with conflict, require decisions on the distribution of wealth. This can not be avoided. As Copes has pointed out, an ITQ system provides individual quotas to some fishermen but not to others. What he did not point out, however, is that a system limiting fishing effort directly, by granting licences to some of the fishermen, also distributes wealth. He states that "to remain economically healthy, the small-boat sector must accept the need to keep fishing capacity in balance with available harvests. This will probably require occasional reductions in fleet size by buy-back, in order to offset likely advances in fleet productivity."

Copes has failed to note that the provision of territorial rights to a community of fishermen (which he advocates and which I agree may generally be desirable) provides wealth to that community and excludes fishermen who are not members of the community.

Copes states that "typically, most inshore fish resources have lent themselves well to harvesting by locally based small-scale fishermen." While this may currently be true in certain situations, it is becoming less and less valid, and is unlikely to continue into the future.

Population growth

It is clear that eventually, as population grows and demand increases, decisions on the distribution of wealth will have to be made. Even the exclusion of large-scale fishing vessels from the waters used by small-scale fishermen will not preclude the eventual necessity for determining



Response

how access within the group of small-scale users will be allocated. Since this is presently necessary in many situations and will be increasingly necessary in the future, it is desirable to examine all the various techniques for controlling access, including the use of ITQs.

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