

Taking Turns Fishing

The Faroe Islands fishing-days system offered hope of regulating fishing effort but now seems to have come up against problems

Until the extension of the fishing grounds limits to 200 miles in 1977, fishing in the Faroe Islands was mainly in the distant waters. But since then the order on the sea has changed. The fishers had to transfer most of their fishing effort to the waters around the Faroes. The fleet was mainly fishing for bottom-dwelling fish like cod, haddock and saithe, a kind of pollock, and the gear used was mostly longlines and trawls. The fish catch was sent to factories ashore.

Until 1994, there was no fishing regulation, but then unpredictably stocks of cod and haddock declined dramatically, causing a serious economic crisis for the Faroe Islands. As a result, a quota system was introduced for these species, with a smaller quota for cod and haddock and a larger one for saithe. Soon cod and haddock stocks recovered to above-normal catch levels.

After a couple of months, in 1995, all the quota for cod and haddock had been fished out, while there was plenty of saithe quota left. Since the the fishing effort for these species are combined and not selective, we had to stop all fishing for the rest of the year as it was not possible to fish saithe without fishing cod and haddock as well.

This was impossible for a fishing community and we realized we had to find a solution other than a quota system to manage the fish stocks. The result was a new management system of individual transferable quotas (ITQs), introduced in 1996, with various restrictions on transferability. The quotas are not

allocated as tonnes of individual species but as fishing days for various groups of fishing vessels in the Faroese fisheries zone. There are five groups of vessels and the system is based on an assessment of the fishing capacity of each vessel group, drawing on data from the period 1985-1994.

In every annual fishing season, each group of vessels is allotted a number of fishing days, which are again divided among a number of individual licences in each group.

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The Committee on Fishing Days, which is made up of industry representatives, gives recommendations to the Minister for Fisheries. The Faroese Fisheries Laboratory assesses the state of the fish stocks and makes recommendations on the number of fishing days and other regulatory measures needed. The Minister then decides on the quotas and prepares a bill to amend the Commercial Fisheries Act.

Regulations

The bill is reviewed by the Fisheries Advisory Body, and is then introduced to the Løgting, the Faroese Parliament, shortly before the new regulatory year starts in September. The system can be better understood with the help of the table below.

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| | | Number of licences | Fishing days: 2003-2004 |
|-----------------|--------------------|--------------------|-------------------------|
| Pair trawlers | | 29 | 6,636 |
| Longliners | | 19 | 2,452 |
| Coastal vessels | Larger than 40 GRT | 45 | 4,269 |
| | 15-40 GRT | 41 | 4,328 |
| | Less than 15 GRT | 1,200 | 21,776 |

The fishing days are divided equally between the vessels in each group, which were the ones existing when the system was established. There are certain rules for exchanging or upgrading an old vessel. Sometimes the result could be two bigger vessels in place of the earlier two smaller ones—but essentially the fishing effort cannot increase.

It is also possible for fishers to buy and sell fishing days within the main group’s longline and trawl fleet. The licences are linked to the vessels and not to the owners or operators. The licence for fishing days can be used anywhere within the 200-mile fishing zone. Some areas are closed to fishing effort, in some cases for all types of fishing, in other cases for trawl or longline fishing.

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If the catches landed are found to consist mostly of juveniles, the fishing ground can be closed immediately for one or two weeks. Although there is no mechanism to prevent concentration of the fleet, so far that has not been a major problem.

The fishermen of the Faroe Islands are quite well organized in trade unions, while the vessel owners are members of shipowners’ organizations. They all have had a part in the development of the fisheries management system, and

are members of an advisory body for the ministry.

The fishermen get a percentage of the catch, after deduction of expenses. By and large, the fishermen consider the day system to be the best for themselves and the whole industry, especially for mixed fisheries. Compared to the fishing fleet of the European Union (EU), the vessels of the Faroe Islands do not face the problem of discards.

The main fish stocks in the Faroe Islands have been assessed annually since the 1970s. The assessments are undertaken by the Faroese Fisheries Laboratory and they are checked by the working group and the advisory process of the International Council for Exploration of the Sea (ICES). The assessments have generally been considered of high standard. It is, however, recognized that accurate predictions are not possible with the present-day knowledge, and so assessments occasionally turn out to be quite wrong. That is why the Committee on Fishing Days scrutinizes in great detail the annual assessments and the recommendations based on them, and, in some instances, has declined to make drastic proposals for changing the number of fishing days based on one year’s assessment only.

The main objective of the regulatory system is to provide a framework for sustainable fisheries in terms of both biological and economic considerations. All fisheries organizations in the Faroe Islands support the regulatory system. It minimizes the risk of discards and forged catch statistics. It also dispenses with the need to set annual quotas on single stocks as the basis for the fisheries regulation, but allows a certain flexibility for main stocks over a number of years, driven by catches and market prices.

Regulatory system

It has been suggested that the fishing-days regulatory system does not allow the fishing fleet to adapt as quickly as a system with quotas of tonnes of fish since it is often easier to find a market price for

tonnes of fish than for fishing days. This aspect has, however, not yet been fully analyzed.

The inherent problem in a regulatory system based on effort is to monitor increases in efficiency which could change the fishing capacity of the different vessel groups. Since 1996-97, the number of fishing days has been reduced by about 30 per cent for the largest vessel groups, but the level of efficiency has yet to be ascertained.

The fishing-days management system was a success for a number of years. The fishing for cod as well as haddock and saithe was good. But a few years ago some environmental changes were observed in the seas. The most visible indication was the death of seabirds, especially puffins, which had always enjoyed a good habitat and living conditions in the Faroe Islands.

But suddenly, over the past seven years, pufflings have started dying of starvation due to lack of food at sea. The only plausible cause is a combination of environmental/ climate changes and rising sea temperatures.

These changes have also affected the bottom-dwelling fish stocks. New fish species, never seen before, have invaded the seas of the Faroe Islands, especially mackerel, which is a predatory fish that consumes a large amount of the food in the sea, thus depriving other species.

At the same time, the stocks of cod and haddock have declined due to bad spawning, which has also affected the overall fishing effort. Ironically, we seem to be the same situation now as when the fishing-days regulatory system was introduced. While no one knows how the situation should be tackled, the general consensus among the fishermen is that the system should be maintained as there seems to be no other feasible alternative. 3



Pair trawlers in the Faroe Islands. The fleet mainly fish for bottom-dwelling species like cod, haddock and saithe

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