

Looking Back, Looking Ahead

The 65-year history of a local committee representing professional fishermen in France reveals an opening up to global concerns on fisheries

“Homme libre, toujours tu chériras la mer” (“Free man, you will always cherish the sea”) — Charles Baudelaire

While the exhortation above might remain just as earnest, in many respects, as when he wrote them in the middle of the 19th century, the conditions of access to the sea have changed considerably since Baudelaire’s time. Then, the fishermen of the South Finistère were dependant on the large numbers of oily pelagic fish, whose annual migration caused populations to move towards Guilvinec and Saint Winwaloe. Access to the sea was unhindered, except for those obstacles the elements themselves brought in, which prevented fishermen from leaving the quay more regularly than today. Indeed, modern advancements allow today’s fishermen to head out to sea more often, for longer periods and further away from their home port. A trawler from the Bigouden region carried out the first trawling in the Celtic sea in 1947 and this began a long tradition of high-sea fishing, with the port of Le Guilvinec supplying many boats. And yet free access to a space that is almost infinite is a long-held, though distant, hope.

This article attempts to describe the development, over its 65-year history, of the Comité Local des Pêches Maritimes et des Élevages Marins du Guilvinec (CLPMEM)—the Guilvinec Local Committee of Marine Fisheries and Fish Farming—a body that represents the fishing community of the Bigouden region. This history throws up questions that are, in many ways, universal. For an easier understanding, the history is

divided into distinct chronological periods. But in complex reality, it is quite rare that one period ended before another began.

Born as the result of an ordinance on 14 August 1945, and in a general context of reconstruction, CLPMEM possessed a certain independence of action and decisionmaking vis-a-vis the national committee in Paris (National Committee of Marine Fisheries and Fish Farming, the apex governing body). Financed from a sales tax set by each local committee (on an *ad valorem* taxation on the

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sale value of fish at auction), this gave the emerging body a certain financial stability.

The goals, at this stage, were to create and manage the collective services dedicated to the profession, to improve training within the sector and to ensure social support. Local newspapers of the day inform us of the concerns of the profession and, beyond, of the body that represented it locally.

The question of the price of fish fuelled worries, and the fishermen called for an end to regulated prices. Production to supply the region was a priority, and regulated prices remained in effect until 1948, to ensure a cheap source of protein.

Free trade

The question of free trade was also at the heart of debates: the import

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of Moroccan mackerel, which led to a fall in market prices, provoked demonstrations in the capital in 1950. Despite these grounds for protest, the sector was in a phase of expansion, based especially on technological progress and port modernisation. CLPME took itself into defending this sector and, little by little, won the hearts of the fishermen.

From the 1970s onwards, the atmosphere changed and new challenges arose. First of all, the issue of fishery resources took

waters and to share national waters as a common pool. But quite soon, the EC's image began to deteriorate among a profession that found it hard, sometimes, to accept the seemingly arbitrary nature of some measures. In the face of these changes, CLPME took a gamble and co-operated with scientists in order to better understand the workings of fishery recruitment, and, eventually, to adapt practices accordingly.

Along with the Institut Français de recherche pour l'exploitation de la mer (IFREMER)—the French Research Institute for Exploitation of the Sea—CLPME developed a selective trawl. Some fishermen reproached the Committee for this proximity, which they considered a sort of betrayal, given the lack of acknowledgement of their own empirical knowledge. But CLPME stayed faithful to its convictions: it was essential to be a part of the decision-making process in order to prevent ill-adapted cut-back measures. This thinking led to the creation of the Observatoire Economique Maritime (OBEMAR)—the Marine Economic Observatory—in 1983, whose goal was to collect data related to fisheries and make available a basis for discussion with actors who were new to the marine sphere.

In the third stage of its development, CLPME opened itself to the world. Study tours were organized to Denmark, the United States and Japan to observe their fisheries sectors and draw inspiration from the different ways of commercializing and consuming fish. This opening up was based on the view that it was becoming increasingly untenable to view things locally.

New activities

While the market had long been international, other issues now crossed borders or were imposed on fishing communities worldwide. The emergence of new activities along the coast was one example: rising living standards in France, combined with the implementation of four, then five, weeks of paid leave drew tourists to the coasts. This change had an impact on both the ports and on resources.

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pride of place on the agenda of decisionmakers. The environmental movement was taking shape at the international level and would, slowly, change our understanding of resource management, especially as regards fisheries. These changes materialized with the implementation of 'Blue Europe' in 1983, following the establishment of a distinct Common Fisheries Policy (CFP), which initiated, *inter alia*, total allowable catches (TACs) and quota management of stocks.

Up to this point, the European Commission had adopted various technical measures, including mesh-size regulation, which provoked widespread strikes in the fishing centres in 1976. However, according to then leaders in CLPME, the European programme at first raised enormous hopes that the market would be opened up, leading to the possibility of wider access to European waters. Indeed, it was the European Commission (EC, which became the European Union in 1993), which put an end to the privatization of national waters, which had come about through the establishment of exclusive economic zones (EEZs) in the 1970s.

The EC decided to protect historical fishing rights in community

On the one hand, investments swung towards enhancing the coastline and, on the other hand, tourism brought with it the growth of sport fishing. This is reflected in the deliberations of CLPME, which, in 1978, launched the slogan “one line, one hook”. This aimed to limit the catches of high-value white fish by recreational fishermen. Another example of the changes being brought is that CLPME had to act to address the issue of treating sludge dredged from marinas. Often discharged in the fishing zones, these jeopardized future fishing, and raised questions about the quality of the water.

The first issue of CLPME’s monthly journal launched in 1977 (*Kealouen ar mor* in Breton, “News from the Sea” in French) noted these changes. It also referred to establishing protected zones as well as the economic problems faced by subsidiary ports. On the one hand, fishing pressure intensified; on the other, fishing was becoming increasingly concentrated amongst few operators, slowly reducing the structuring aspect it had on the regional economy. Additionally, during the 1970s, the question of diesel oil became a concern for the economic profitability of the fleets, particularly so after the first oil crisis in 1973.

At the same time, social progress continued and CLPME persisted with its mission to put in place and manage collective services (an unemployment fund for bad weather, a review of the status of women, and so on).

The fourth period of CLPME’s growth, from 1980 to 1990, was a move from a stable period to a time of crisis. Despite profound changes in the context in which fisheries were evolving, the sector was in good economic health. Production progressed in the 1980s, thanks to technological advancements and rising prices, which guaranteed a comfortable income for fishermen in the maritime sector. In 1985, there were 2,000 fishermen, 700 boats and 8,000 ancillary jobs in the sector. Shipyard order books were full

while the work of extending quays and modernizing of the port fish auctions were in hand. Peak production was attained in 1985-86, which was followed by a decrease in tonnage. Nonetheless, the steady and ever rising prices in the port auctions maintained an optimistic atmosphere.

It was the rupture of this fragile balance between falling tonnage and rising prices in 1991 that threw the sector into one of the most profound crises in its history.

As a result of a decrease in customs duties on marine products, it was possible to import huge quantities of fish from eastern Europe. These relatively low-cost consignments of fish (‘torpedo consignments’, as they were labelled) effectively undermined the market for French fish, which was unable to compete. At the same time, the Mellick plan was put in place: this aimed to reduce the power of the French fleet, at a national level, by 100,000 kw, in order to reduce the overall fishing effort of the European fleet. This led to a drop in the number of vessels in the marine fisheries sector from 700 in 1985, to 461 in 1993, further accentuating the climate of depression in the sector. A strike was organized in February 1993 to save the fisheries and to demand ‘community preference’. Several of the demonstrations are memorable,

RENE-PIERRE CHEVER



Robert Bouguéon, Louis Le Roux and André Le Berre, three of the four last presidents of the Comite Local in Le Guivinec, which has a 65-year history of working with fishers

including the ransacking of Rungis, the national wholesale fish market in Paris, and the massive protests in Guilvinec and Quimper. The fishermen won a temporary reprieve from their social-security contributions and obtained support from the producers' organizations, even though this was well below the demands made during the demonstrations, especially by CLPMEM. At the same time, the issue of fishing for tuna by drifting gillnets was raised: non-governmental organizations (NGOs) working to

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protect the environment called upon the European Community to ban this activity.

The sector suffered, but its contributions to the issue of selective trawls proved that it could adapt. The square-meshed panels, introduced by a fishermen from the sector, is an example. It allowed the juvenile fish, especially the small hake, to escape, but held back the langoustine (scampi or Dublin Bay prawns), which the fishery targeted. It would be misleading to believe that all the fishermen followed the selective measures from the time they were launched; it took time for its efficiency to be proved before the majority of the fleet converted. This initiative prevented yet another reduction in the mesh size for langoustines.

The 2000s continued to witness these changes in the sector and saw a huge rise in the number of environmental issues which took up increasing space on the agenda of CLPMEM. Based on the environmental commission of the Committee, the strategy of involving fishermen, which was put in place several decades earlier, continued unchanged. Additionally, the team of elected and permanent staff members had to face an old problem which had now become an urgent issue among

MFV Bugaled Breizh

The *MFV Bugaled Breizh* is a French trawler from Loctudy, Finistère, whose sinking with all hands on 15 January 2004 remains an unresolved mystery. While it appears likely that the ship was pulled under by a submarine, a specific submarine could not be identified as a number of submarines of several nations were in the vicinity of the accident site. *Source: Wikipedia*

the fishermen—diesel prices. This issue would lead to strikes in 2007, following the removal of a mechanism that compensated for price rises. Though this mechanism was put in place at a national level, it was rejected at the European level.

In January 2004, the affair of the *MFV Bugaled Breizh* shocked the sector and provided fishermen with an opportunity to demonstrate their solidarity with those colleagues who had died at sea, in conditions that remain a mystery.

CLPMEM acted as civil party in the trial, trying to help the families in their search for truth.

Similarly, in 2005, fishermen from the marine fishing sector wished to respond to the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami that affected the coastal populations of mainly south and southeast Asia. CLPMEM co-ordinated operations in the marine fishing sector and was honoured by being present in Sri Lanka for the distribution of relief material collected by the fishermen for reconstructing houses and boats.

Links made

This solidarity movement was part of the tradition of openness to the world which began early on within CLPMEM and which took shape when links were made with the International Collective in Support of Fishworkers (ICSF) in 1986, on the initiative of the elected and permanent staff. ICSF facilitated exchanges between fisher communities around the world, which provided the framework for the creation of organizations of fishers. The General Assembly of the World Forum of Fishharvesters



The general assembly of the World Forum of Fishharvesters and Fishworkers (WFF) was held in October 2000 at Loctudy, in the heart of the marine fisheries sector of Guilvinec


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The agenda that WFF has taken on is to address the concerns of fishermen worldwide. Resource management, the role of women in fisheries, and reconciling fishing, tourism and marine protected areas (MPAs) were also topics of discussion.

The strikes of 2007-2008 led to the public powers launching a debate on fishery governance, a debate that certain members of the sector demanded, as they found the functioning of different bodies ill-adapted to modern realities. While the first steps outlined for structural reform raised fears that decision making would become centralized, the final outcome has retained space for manoeuvre for the departmental bodies which are closest to the fishermen.

On the new page being opened by the representative bodies, the agenda includes increasing pressure

on space, arising from new concerns such as the development of marine renewable energy or the setting up of MPAs. The fishermen are not opposed to these projects in principle, but only demand that their rights be given fair consideration as regards their economic and spatial existence. By the same reasoning, they will continue to engage with decision-making bodies and to valorise data collected by the profession itself on the practices and the spatial requirements of fishery activities.

Perhaps, one day, when the archives of CLPMEM are scrutinized, we will have a clearer understanding of this period in French fisheries history, so rich in changes. 

For more

www.leguilvinec.com/public/pages/lequartiermar_leportdepeche.php

Guilvinec : First Marine District of France

www.comitedespeches-finistere.fr/

The Department of the Committee on Fisheries (Le Comité Départemental des Pêches)