

What do fishermen really think?

Only a sense of belonging and involvement will induce fishermen to co-operate with fisheries regulation

Few would disagree that the success of a fisheries management system depends upon the co-operation of fishermen. In the context of European fisheries, where the management of the major fisheries is now firmly in the hands of non-fishermen, co-operation is now of the utmost importance. For a management system to function well, it has to ensure a high degree of compliance for a number of reasons. Non-compliance, particularly when it relates to overfishing, is harmful to fish stocks.

Non-compliance is also expensive—it requires extra resources to police and prosecute and, last but by no means least, non-compliance leads to false or inaccurate information and data which ultimately leads to misleading policy recommendations.

There are many ways to increase compliance levels in fisheries. The results of a study recently conducted in the UK suggest that understanding fishermen's perceptions of the aims and objectives of fisheries regulations is important.

If the regulators know how their advice and policies are going to be received, they can adapt the way the information is communicated to ensure that policies are understood, and appear believable and fair. Fishermen's perceptions of regulations can ultimately influence the success or failure of a regulatory system.

Fisheries management in the EU is a highly complex affair: it is bureaucratic, data-dependent, and the central decision-making body is often far removed from the fishing community. Therefore, effective communication and information are of paramount importance to make the system work and work well.

Effective communication consists of two elements: the credibility of the information and the credibility of its source. The means used to transmit information impacts upon how that information is received and understood. Failure to communicate the reason and rationale for certain regulations leads to increased non-compliance by fishermen who either fail to understand what is required of them, or wilfully disrupt the system because it is impeding their ability to make a living. Communication systems are needed in order that fisheries data can be transferred up the 'ladder' from the fishermen to the regulators, while information on policy changes and regulations needs to be communicated down the 'ladder'.

Yet, information and communication in the fisheries management system consist of more than numbers and regulations. Information on the aims and objectives of the management system is needed so that all stakeholders can participate in the decision-making process in a meaningful way. Communication also relies upon recognizing the networks already present: understanding where fishermen go for advice, who they are more likely to believe and how the information is perceived, is important. If the nodal points of information in the community are recognized and used by those outside the community, there is a much greater chance of co-operation evolving.

Information needs

Information in various forms is needed to manage all fisheries, but developed countries are particularly reliant upon data to support the management system. Much of the data required in those fisheries managed under the Common Fisheries Policy come from the fishermen, and in order for it to do what it was

intended to do, it has to be accurate. Effort, catch and landings data are all required to inform policy decisions and share the UK's TAC (Total Allowable Catch) allocation.

In the UK, quotas are a particular form of fishery management that relies upon information. Output quotas, such as catch and landings restrictions, are based on scientific assessment of the stocks. Some of the information that contribute to this assessment come from catch and landings records submitted by fishermen.

False information fed into the system will lead to inaccurate policy decisions. So, it is hardly surprising that critical to the quota decision-making process is the need for accurate data which, in turn, relies upon the quotas set being perceived as fair. However, attempts to improve the information on catch and landings are often undermined by the differing perceptions of fishermen and regulators. The fishermen have little faith in the way the information is used and the regulators fail to understand the implications of the request for more data on the livelihoods of the fishermen.

The failure of the regulators and the fishermen to understand or adequately communicate the end-use of the information affects its usefulness. The perceived overload of information required by the authorities leads to alienation—the fishermen increasingly feel that they are being prevented from fishing by mounting paper work. The result is an increased unwillingness to participate or co-operate with the system. On the other hand, management decisions based on inadequate data hold little water with fishermen who often refer to 'folk knowledge' with regard to stock levels, and have little faith in scientific analysis of fisheries. Confrontation frequently occurs when government predictions on stock levels fail to match with what the fishermen believe to be right.

A successful management system engenders a sense of 'ownership' in the system through increased participation by the resource users in the management process. This participation is, to an extent, made possible by improved communication and information flows.

Co-management, an issue much discussed in the literature on fisheries management, supports this point. However, there is some debate about the degree of participatory co-management in UK fisheries. There are a number of studies that have been done on compliance and co-operation levels in fisheries. These studies have attempted to identify, through econometric tests, the factors that are likely to lead to compliance. They have, on the whole, supported the arguments put forward by the co-management debate—that a sense of belonging and involvement is important to promoting compliance and co-operation.

Contributing further to the compliance/co-management debate, a study was conducted in the UK in the winter of 1997, with funding from the EU, to find out precisely what factors led to higher levels of compliance. The study interviewed 69 skippers of vessels over 10m fishing against quota species. Using data collected from both open and closed questions, a picture emerged of fishermen's perceptions about quotas, their involvement in the management process, and the nature of the relationship between themselves and scientists. Quotas are one of the most important restrictions facing fishermen in the UK, and fines for landing fish in excess of their quota can be large.

It is perhaps not surprising to learn that the fishermen interviewed believed that they were the most law-abiding of all (compared to fishermen in the rest of the UK and Europe) and that they were the most targeted by the authorities (who have powers to board vessels to check that the quantity of fish on board matches that recorded in the logbook).

Although 43.5 per cent of those interviewed estimated that up to 10 per cent of their landings of quota species the previous year had been over-quota, the myth that this was slight compared to other communities was powerful and deeply embedded.

Little evidence

There is little evidence to support the perception of the fishermen that foreign vessels are openly flouting the law, yet,

the fact that they perceive themselves to be the most law-abiding and yet the most targeted impacts upon their attitude to the system. Many of those interviewed felt they were picked on by the authorities and could not win in a system that was regarded as so unfair and biased.

Information and communication proved themselves important in maintaining morale in the community, and there was a strong sense of identity. However, despite the often-stated feeling that landing over-quota was damaging stocks and distorting the system, and despite knowing that fishermen in their region were landing over-quota, none of the fishermen interviewed had ever reported another fisherman for landing over-quota fish. There are a number of reasons for this. Firstly, they seemed unwilling to report what they felt rather than knew for sure. Secondly, there was a sense that they all had to live together as a community, and turning over friends and colleagues to the authorities was not the best way to maintain community cohesiveness.

The quota system is an extremely contentious factor in British fisheries, but an interesting result of the study was that only 38 per cent of those interviewed wanted to see the system abolished. Even those fishermen who claimed to have landed over-quota fish in the previous year (and therefore, presumably, saw

quotas as a barrier to earning a good living) were more likely to think that the system should be improved rather than abolished.

Some fishermen approved of quotas as an effort management tool and even reported that they agreed with the right of the EU to manage quotas under the present system. There was overwhelming support for the view that the present system would work better if the quotas were more fairly distributed both among groups in the UK and between countries in the EU.

Although most stated that they understood the rationale behind quotas (to maintain catches at a sustainable level), few considered the system logical in the way it allocated quota between countries and groups of fishermen. They felt that other groups in the UK and in other member States got larger quotas than they did, often as a result of political expediency and wholesale cheating. There is, of course, no evidence to support these allegations, but they have become a founding myth of the CFP fisheries management history.

False information

In addition to the issue of allocation, fishermen considered one of the main problems with the quota system to be the amount of false information upon which they believe quotas are based. Since the fish landed over-quota fails to find its way

into the official figures (false landing declarations are submitted), the fishermen believe that the quotas based on landing declarations are highly inaccurate, have no legitimacy and are thus abused.

This results in a vicious circle: the fishermen agree with quotas but disagree with how they are shared out and how they are set. Since they dispute quota sizes, they ignore them, which leads to more inaccurate quotas the following year, and thus the cycle continues ad infinitum.

More than 80 per cent of the fishermen said they found it difficult to take quota restrictions seriously because they believed there were plenty of fish on the grounds. The pessimistic predictions from fisheries scientists simply did not match what they believed to be the situation.

While the fishermen undoubtedly have knowledge of the state of the stocks in the waters they regularly fish, and base their assumption on visual sightings and catches, the scientists base their knowledge on information not readily perceptible to the eye: size and distribution of the species, and the state of related stocks in neighbouring fishing grounds. Improved communication between scientists and fishermen is needed so that a measure of compromise between 'scientific knowledge' and 'folk knowledge' is achieved. The result should be that quota decisions and allocations are understood and respected by both sides.

Although the fishermen accepted quotas as a means of regulating catches, nearly 40 per cent of them wanted to see quotas supplemented with technical measures (such as square-mesh nets). This, however, is an odd finding: some have argued in the fisheries literature that, given the opportunity to manage themselves, fishermen rarely impose catch limits but do impose limits on fishing time, gear, etc.

Visible inputs such as gear restrictions are cheaper and easier to police. Setting catch limits is an expensive exercise, and enforcing those limits is difficult. Catch or landing quotas also require decisions to be made on 'wealth distribution' which most fishing communities do not want to

address because it would involve raising prickly issues within the community. Finally, setting catch limits restricts the 'hunting' element of fishing and prevents skippers demonstrating their 'skill' as fishermen, which could affect the traditional hierarchy of fishermen in the community.

So why would these fishermen opt for both catch and gear restrictions? Rights to the fishery could be one reason. At the moment, quotas imply a recognition of a history in the fishery and a right to fish. They are, therefore, seen as preferable to no catch limits, which would wipe out their rights as they currently stand. With the high level of feeling about the perceived loss of national management of the fishery and the perception that foreign fishermen are 'stealing' British fish, the possession of quota could impart a feeling of control and involvement in the fishery.

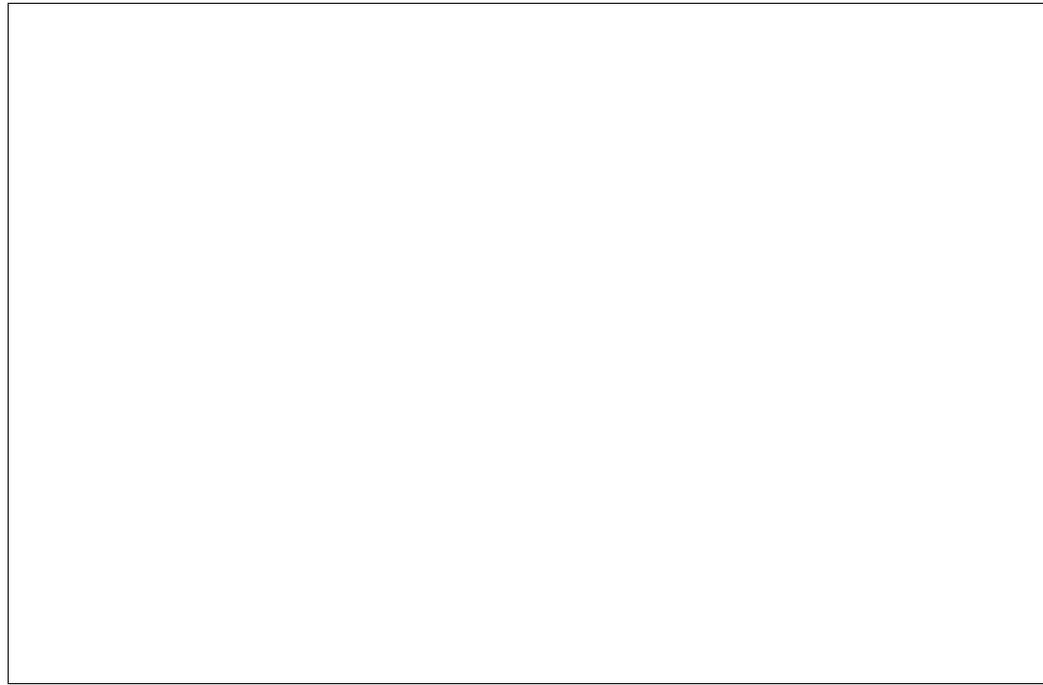
Those fishermen who were members of Producer Organizations (POs) tended to feel more involved in the decision-making process, which certainly supports the view that POs can engender co-management in fisheries. But 92 per cent of fishermen believed that they should have more involvement in the management system. Those who felt they had the least input to the system were the fishermen who were not members of POs (a minority) and those who skippered the smallest boats.

Greater involvement in fisheries management has practical implications involving time commitments that many of the owner-skipper can not afford. More localized management, with a greater degree of control by fishermen, was seen as a way of improving the current quota management system and making the system as a whole more regionally pertinent.

There is still a perceived gap between 'local' and 'national' management: national government is perceived not to react to information sent up the network by local organizations.

Held responsible

Although quotas are set by the UK government, Brussels, a long way culturally and geographically from the



fishing communities, is held responsible for the restrictions applied to the fishermen. Although de-centralizing control and management is not synonymous with co-management, it can help improve the perception of participatory management.

As fisheries regulations have to meet the needs of all users of the resource, the fisheries management system becomes more complex, and requires more information. Its complexity can increase misunderstanding and incomprehension of regulations and information, and contribute to increasing battles against the system by the fishermen. The key to success, however, is to make sure that the burden of information does not become too great—too much (bad) information is often worse than too little information. While policymakers and enforcers have a perception of how fishermen relate to, and with, the management system by which they are bound, this is often at odds with the perception of fishermen.

Fishermen in the UK are probably no more or less law-abiding than their European counterparts and no more mistrusting of their rivals on the fishing grounds. Should research be carried out, it would probably find that the perceptions of UK fishermen about fisheries regulations are no different from those of other Europeans, although, of course, the villains of the piece would

change nationality! While non-compliance is by no means rampant in UK fisheries, things could be better: but this requires compromise by the fishermen and the government. 

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