

CHRISTMAS RECEPTION SUMMARY

The Baroness Wilcox

Held at The Royal Society, 6-9 Carlton House Terrace, London SW1Y 5AG
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BARONESS WILCOX recounted her experience in the family fishing business in Plymouth which had led to her interest in conservation of food stocks, and, eventually, to her concern in consumer interests, and public worry about health and safety in food. The family business revolved around catching mackerel off Plymouth, which for years had been a sustainable business because neither the scale of the fishing, nor the technical measures to enable over fishing to take place, had been present. But the advent of the supermarkets, with their tremendous demand, and their very rigid standards about size and fat content of fish, had meant that fishing had to be concentrated in a six week period when the shoals were at their biggest and the fish at their best. This had brought large fishing boats from Scotland, with echo sounding equipment and nets, which allowed them to identify and Hoover up whole shoals of mackerel. In this way, the whole contents of the shoal were captured, with both immature and mature fish being harvested. 30% of the catch was crushed in the nets and a 3-year growth cycle aborted. Naturally, after some years, the fishing off Plymouth was destroyed. She then went to Scotland, where the same process was repeated in other waters by even bigger Russian trawlers. Science had given us the knowledge, and technology the means, to wipe out a major food resource.

She became increasingly concerned with the ill-informed public panics, fuelled by irresponsible media stories, about food safety. She was convinced that one way of helping to deal with this problem was for Government Departments, in particular MAFF, to inform and consult consumers more fully. MAFF did, indeed start to do this, but the success of these initiatives was made increasingly difficult by the public mistrust of science and scientists. It was clear that much needed to be done to bring the science community to understand the concerns of the public, and the public to understand the nature of scientific process. Both scientists and the public needed to understand the reach and the limits of science. She paid tribute to the work of Lord Jenkin and his committee on the report on Science and Society. She believed it had started to change attitudes, so that both the wonders of science, and the understanding that it did not have all the answers, were acknowledged. She concluded by acknowledging the difficulties that politicians faced in dealing with this subject, but also their achievements in identifying common ground where different interests and perspectives had to be reconciled.

Sir Geoffrey Chipperfield KBE

So she left the industry and went to work with the Consumer Council and with think tanks concerned with the Common Fishing policy.