



THE FOUNDATION
FOR SCIENCE AND
TECHNOLOGY



THE GREENWICH FORUM

To Promote Public Awareness of Britain's Dependence on the Sea

DINNER/DISCUSSION SUMMARY

“THE DECLINE IN GLOBAL FISH STOCKS”

Held at the Royal Society, 6 Carlton House Terrace, London SW1Y 5AG

Tuesday 13th November, 2001

Sponsored by:

Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs
The Fishmongers' Company
The Southampton Oceanography Centre

In the Chair: **The Rt Hon The Lord Jenkin of Roding**, Chairman
The Foundation for Science and Technology

Speakers: **The Earl of Selborne KBE DL FRS**
House of Lords
The Rt Hon John Gummer MP
Chairman, Marine Stewardship Council
Mr Elliot Morley MP
Parliamentary Under-Secretary, DEFRA
Mr John Williams FNI
General Manager, Boyd Line Management Services Ltd

The lectures were mainly concerned with supply questions - the management of fish stocks and fishing capacity. In discussion attention was drawn to factors tending to increase demand. There were problems with meat on the hoof, eating fish was promoted commercially and recommended for reasons of health, and new outlets such as sushi bars were popular. In the face of competition from fish farming the catching industry had an incentive to market its goods as a quality food, so that the industry was no longer open to the reproach that it turned a product into a commodity.

Many looked to the farming of fish as a way to meet rising demand. The problem was that farmed fish ate fish. One possibility might be to feed them on the output of industrial fishing rather than using this for fishmeal, but that would only be a temporary solution. Another possibility might be to feed grain to farmed fish, but novel diets for farmed animals could carry unforeseen risks, as BSE had shown.

It was asked how trawling could be reconciled with conservation of the sea bed, given current knowledge of its effects. There seemed to be different concepts of stewardship for land and sea. In response it was said that the Barents Sea had been trawled throughout the last century without

destroying fish stocks. Other fishing methods had disadvantages: fishing off the bottom could harm small fish, and line fishing was relatively unproductive and caught seabirds.

Research on the effects of trawling on the sea bed had been done using closed areas for comparison, and had not produced evidence of real damage. Nevertheless more research was needed, and should take account of the effects of bottom fishing on marine organisms other than fish. It was observed that the Scottish pelagic fishing industry presented a paradox, with considerable overcapacity yet very healthy supplies of mackerel and herring.

Young people needed to be recruited to make sure that there would still be people to fish them in the long term. One participant described fishing on the high seas as the last hunter-gatherer activity. It remained unclear what forms of control might succeed. Countries often saw fishing as part of their heritage, but fishing grounds were shared and control had to be multinational. One model might be that of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), which had, for example, achieved a measure of agreement over climate change.

There was reasonable agreement over the state of the major world fisheries and it was realistic to aim for a scientific consensus within which local decisions could be made on management. In the North Atlantic there were a number of different management structures, some working better than others. The Icelandic regime, for example, was not wholly successful but was a lot better than the EU system.

There had been a so-called stakeholder dialogue on European fishing policy, but one speaker wondered who the stakeholders were and whether consultations from the bottom up would have a real effect on decisions. One response was that special pleading was inevitable but did not remove the need for inclusive and transparent debate.

Another contributor reported on experience in Canada, where fishermen taking part in local discussions tended to fall into two categories - risk takers and risk avoiders. The latter adopted the vacuum cleaner approach to fishing grounds. At meetings they all claimed to want to be risk takers. It was unfortunate that international disputes later led to a concentration on the science, to the exclusion of economic factors and ideas for involving fishermen in local management schemes.

Any control system needed to be enforced, and there were too few EU fisheries inspectors to do the job. It was suggested that the Royal Navy and its counterparts in other member states might play a part. Fishery protection work could promote co-operation in other areas between national navies. Modern technology made it easier to track where boats went, but a presence was still needed in fishing areas, and arrangements for dealing with miscreants when they returned to port.

Fishermen wanted a level playing field, and it was suggested that some other member states did not follow the rules. In response one participant doubted whether the UK could be left off any list of offenders. Every member state claimed to be hotter on enforcement than the rest, but the British were not tougher than, for example, the Norwegians. Once at sea, it was suggested, most national fishing fleets tended to forget the rules.

One contributor to the debate criticised the tendency to rely on regulation and the criminal law to change the way fishermen acted. They were in business, and the way to influence them was through incentives, using economics and psychology. Another speaker sympathised with this argument, but had found in practice that everyone was in favour of conservation measures until they actually conserved. Devastatingly strong measures were needed, because a decline could suddenly become a rout. When the Newfoundland

fisheries went the same way it would be Ministers, not fishermen, who would be blamed.

Economic measures would not necessarily be gentle. Capacity needed to be cut by something like 60%, on one view. Another speaker observed that if Governments had been stupid enough to pay for excess capacity they must now take people out of the industry. Better ships equalled more ability to catch fish. The measures required would be painful and terminal for those concerned, not transitional. No new money was needed: the vast EU resources which went on subsidising the fleet should be spent more intelligently on short-term help to support the communities affected, and the resolve must then be never again to subsidise anyone to catch fish.

In the long term, it was argued, market forces had to be put to work. Consumers should be encouraged to choose fish from sustainable sources.

A labelling scheme had been started, and the hope was that in a few years' time the big supermarkets would only sell fish from properly managed stocks. Another speaker thought that consumers would ultimately avoid fish from countries which adopted unpopular practices. The Icelanders were talking about going back to whaling, but if they did so it would blight sales of Icelandic cod.

The lectures and discussion had focussed on economic and social matters. One participant wanted to know what was the state of scientific knowledge. One answer offered was that ten years ago the question would have been where things stood, but now all agreed that the picture was bad. There was a lot of argument over the modelling of fish stocks, but the fact was that when researchers went looking for mature cod in the North Sea they had a lot of difficulty finding them.

Another speaker referred to quite unequivocal scientific evidence of gross over-fishing. The debate had been very parochial in its focus on Europe. Sixteen out of the seventeen major world fisheries were very seriously overexploited, but mainly by underdeveloped countries which could not afford to commission research into the effects of what they were doing. Given the right economics the North Atlantic would come right, but in the developing world simple solutions were needed. Fisheries science rested on a sound intellectual basis but was not usable in the third world.

These comments prompted one participant to remark in conclusion that if Europeans could not acknowledge and sort out their problems they could hardly expect Fijians or Solomon Islanders to take notice.

Jeff Gill