

Fishing Industry Falls Victim to the Tragedy of the Commons

by Michael McCarthy

There's a telling phrase for it: the tragedy of the commons. It happens because people think they can take a limitless amount of the earth's 'free gifts' such as the atmosphere or the sea or now, we are realizing, the fish.

For centuries these so-called 'global commons' have had no prices attached to them and so nothing to impose restraint on their use. Go ahead, take the atmosphere to dump your smoke in, take the sea to dump your effluent in. Fish to your heart's content, with ever more trawlers. It's all free.

And for centuries, nothing harmful happens, such is the seemingly limitless bounty of the Earth. But on a finite globe, the limits logically have to be reached at some stage, and yesterday's news that scientists are recommending banning all cod fishing in the North Sea means that time is now.

There are fish stocks in trouble all over the world. The most celebrated example is another cod stock, that of the Grand Banks off Newfoundland. When this fishery was discovered in 16th century, the cod were said to be so plentiful that a basket merely dipped into the water would be brought up brimming with fish. "You could walk on the backs of the cod," it was said.

For nearly 500 years the Grand Banks offered up their amazing harvest, until in the 20th century a sinister process began: the fishing effort began to outpace the ability of the fish stock to replace itself. It dwindled and dwindled, and then in 1989 it abruptly collapsed.

In 1992 the fishery was formally closed, throwing thousands of Canadian fishermen out of work; it has not reopened and it seems unlikely that it will.

It is the fear of this seemingly-permanent collapse which is clearly in the back of the minds of the specialists advising European fisheries ministers to call a halt to North Sea cod fishing right away. Fish are not like wheat; you cannot simply sow them each year in the sea. Their population dynamics are complex and depend on a range of factors, especially the age at which they start to breed.

Cod typically start breeding at between four and six years old, but intensive fishing pressure may take out many of these bigger fish so that breeding slows down in a cumulative process, until virtually no new "recruits" to the breeding stock are coming through. This is what has happened off the east coast of Britain.

"We have stripped out the breeding group of cod from the North Sea," said Euan Dunn, the fisheries policy officer for the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, and one of the closest observers of the workings – or non-workings, depending on your point of view – of Europe's Common Fisheries Policy (CFP).

"Cod stocks are in freefall now," Dr Dunn said. "Fishermen are catching more and more juvenile fish.

"The stock is at a historic low level owing to a combination of poor recruitment and very high fishing pressure, and this may be irreversible if very, very stringent measures are not taken."

Cod stocks are in a poor state right across the North Atlantic, and even Icelandic cod stocks are not as healthy as they were. The stocks have got so low that their dynamics are getting hard to predict, and the scientific models about what might happen are becoming less and less dependable. A further problem now being detected is the possible advent of global warming: as the sea waters warm, cod seem to be moving further north to cooler waters where they prefer to spawn.

But there appears to be no doubt that fishing pressure is the main threat. However there can be a wide gap between what scientists recommend and what fisheries ministers decide to do, and this gap points up the failure of the CFP.

The alarm is not new: the scientists have been sounding it for a decade and more. But over the 12 years from 1987 to 1999, officials of the European Commission in Brussels said earlier this month, EU fisheries ministers have set annual catch quotas on average 30 per cent higher than the scientists recommended.

Fisheries ministers tend to be vocal advocates for their national fishing industries, intent on merely getting as big a quota as possible for their fishermen every year, and disregarding the bigger picture and the warnings about shrinking stocks. Elliot Morley, the current British Fisheries Minister, has been a notable exception to the rule.

Their short-sightedness is now carrying over into opposition to reform of the CFP itself; France, Spain, Portugal, Ireland, Greece and Italy have set their face against proposed changes which would safeguard stocks by scientific limitation of fishing effort.

It is not hard to see why a fisheries minister listens to his fishermen rather than somebody else's scientists: livelihoods are at stake. Thousands of Scottish jobs are threatened by any North Sea cod ban. Peterhead is the biggest white fish port in Europe.

"These are really desperate straits for the Scottish industry, and if there is a ban it will be on its knees," Dr Dunn said.

But there cannot be an industry if there are no fish. What the CFP has not delivered is an industry that is sustainable.

Unless stocks are managed tightly by all concerned with them they may well collapse, and soon, and the first tragedy of the commons will have been played out.

Fishing Industry Falls Victim to the Tragedy of the Commons Reading Questions

Directions: After reading the article, **ON YOUR OWN PAPER**, complete questions # 1-7.

1. In your own words, explain the tragedy of the commons.
2. Why is the North Sea Cod population unable to recover from overfishing?
3. Why is there a wide gap between what scientists recommend and what fisheries ministers decide to do?
4. Do you think there is solution for the Cod fishing industry in the North Sea? Explain your response.
5. What are some possible reasons that common resources get exploited
6. Other than oceans, what are some other examples of natural resources that are common resources?
7. Think of local commons that you are familiar with (parking lots, classrooms, public bathrooms, etc.). Do similar situation arise (exploitation due to selfishness)? Explain. How might those problems be solved?