

# A Management Fantasy?

**Rights-based management of inland fisheries in the Netherlands through parcelling out areas of water may remain a bit of a fantasy**

**T**hey stole my fishing rights,” says professional fisher Ruub Klop from Hardinxveld, a small riverside town in the Netherlands. The thieves in question are from the federation of anglers in the southwest of the Netherlands. It was in 1975 that Ruub suddenly discovered that the federation was renting the so-called ‘scaled fish rights’ from the State, in the same area for which he has a permit from the State to fish with legal professional fishing gear.

To understand this fisher’s anger and frustration, we need to know more about the history of inland fishing in the Netherlands. In terms of geography, the Netherlands is not much more than the mouth of the river Rhine, spreading out in a huge delta. The inland water surface area is around 380,000 hectares (ha). Still, 10 per cent of the country’s surface area is freshwater, although a large part of the lakes and, especially, the swamps was converted into agricultural land through the construction of polders. Inland fisheries is only a small sector in the Dutch economy, with some 500 persons employed in the capture fisheries. Still, it is seen as a valuable part of Dutch history and culture.

Like marine fisheries, inland fisheries in the Netherlands was, for a large part, an open-access fisheries until the early 1900s. A system of fishing licenses was in place for regulation purposes (some licenses were for free), but the main function of the licenses was taxation.

Anyone who wanted to catch fish with pots, traps, spears, fykes, nets or hooks-and-line, and could afford to buy a fishing licence, could do so. There were a few exemptions to the open-access character of the fisheries. Some

noblemen claimed the rights to the fish in the lakes and parts of the rivers in their territories. These noblemen did not fish themselves but handed over their rights to others as a kind of favour or sold them off permanently. Also, the economically important salmon fisheries was regulated by very expensive annual permits that were auctioned off to the highest bidder.

During the Second World War, when fishing at sea was too dangerous, inland fish became very important as a source of food. It was during that period that common inland fishing areas were subdivided into parcels that were

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rented out by the State to individuals who were allowed to use professional fishing gear like pots, traps, nets and longlines. (The types of gear that are allowed are specified in the national fisheries laws.)

## **Overfishing**

In this way, the government prevented unlimited access to the resource so as to prevent overfishing in an era with many mouths to feed and few alternative income opportunities. Overfishing manifested itself mostly in the lakes and less so in the rivers. In the rivers, the decline of stocks of migratory fish like salmon and sea trout was, however, alarming. As always, fishers were blamed for the stock decline, but today we know that heavy pollution of

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Fishermen on the river Rhine pulling in a large fyke net used to catch salmon. The system of fishing lots gave fishermen in the Netherlands the incentive to optimize their fisheries

eel, carp, pikeperch, pike, roach and bream. In the 1950s and 1960s, however, angling rapidly became an important recreational activity for industrial workers and retired citizens. Their numbers expanded rapidly. At first there was good harmony with the professional fishers, who often earned additional income from selling bait fish to the recreational fishers, but, after some time, disagreements arose on the amount of fish to be harvested and stocked. The anglers organized themselves rapidly, and some of the region-based organizations approached retiring professional fishers and offered to buy them out. In the case of the fishing rights owned by the noblemen, this meant transfer of rights to the anglers; in the case of leased fishing rights, a transfer from the fisher-lessee to the anglers' organization-lessee. Some, mostly retiring fishers without successors, accepted the offers.

In many places, buying out fishers was, however, not possible since the waters were rented by the local organization of professional fishers, not by individual fishers. Feeling themselves limited in their expansion moves, the organized anglers used their numbers—claiming more than a million members—to exert political pressure. The government was amenable to such pressure since it came with the seemingly valid argument that quality recreational activities for workers was an important aspect of maintaining the quality of life in a rapidly industrializing country. Also, politicians feared rubbing the anglers the wrong way during election time—their voting power was often exploited by the organizations of anglers. In the 1960s, the industry that developed around angling also began to assert a role. In 2000, the estimated value of the angling business was around seven times that of professional fishing and processing.

In 1972, the civil servants in the Department of Agriculture and Fisheries wrote a policy paper that, if implemented, would have increased the role of the anglers' organizations and, at the same time, allowed the continuation of fishing by small-scale professional fishers. The idea was that recreational fishers and professional

the rivers and the destruction of gravel banks are the main culprits. The gravel banks were the natural spawning grounds for migratory fish.

With the system of fishing lots, a professional fisher no longer had to fear that the small fish he let escape would be caught by other fishers in the same area. The system gave fishers the incentive to optimize their fisheries, at least for non-migratory species. Another advantage of the new renting system was that the period covered was six years. In contrast to yearly bidding, the fisher was ensured tenure of the area for a longer period. This made management measures like stocking of

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young eels (called glass eels) or carp feasible in the area.

The system of individual and group access rights through renting out parcels of water worked well for several years, while some regional governments initiated collective lease contracts. The professional fishers were the ones stocking and harvesting

fishers could—and should—fish peacefully together in the same area, but that anglers should depend on professional fishers by leasing out fishing rights. The idea of anglers' organizations owning fishing rights and binding anglers to their organizations through the issuance of fishing permits was very attractive.

The civil servants introduced the idea of renting out split fishing rights in the same area. The rights to eel should go to the professional fishers, and the rights to scaled fish (all other species) should go to the anglers. In the 1970s and 1980s, the catches of eel and the prices fetched were so good (forming 90 per cent of the fishers' income) that other freshwater fish like pike and bream became less and less popular. Many old fishers were attracted to the idea of splitting their fishing rights in exchange for a sum of money.

Politically, it was not acceptable to withdraw fishing rights from the professional fishers and lease them out to the anglers' organizations without just compensation. Civil servants of the Department of Fisheries were, therefore, tasked by their superiors to approach retiring fishers and leaders of organized fishers with the request to turn over the scaled fishing rights to the organizations of anglers. The fishers were paid by the anglers' organization and the government for transferring the lease contract of the scaled fishing rights to the anglers. In the history of Dutch inland fishing this has come to be called the "splitting of fishing rights".

In case of the popular fishing grounds in the Rhine river estuary, the case was somewhat different. The professional fishers held the right to fish in this area through fishing permits issued to them by the national government. These permits allowed them the use of different fishing gear in the area, while the area itself was not rented out to them, as the State retained the fishing rights. The professional fishers did not mind individual anglers fishing in the same waters as they did. The government, however, accommodated the anglers' organizations by giving them the authority to issue fishing permits to anglers wanting to fish in the area.

In the case where fishing is regulated by the issuance of permits to fish in a certain area, it is the government that continues to be responsible for the day-to-day management of the fisheries in the area. The professional fishers could live with this management practice since the government never interfered in their fisheries, and the stocks in the area flourished with the improvement of the water quality in the 1970s. The anglers, however, complained and accused the professional fishers of overexploitation of the stocks of predatory fish. With the help of civil servants in the Fisheries Department, they manoeuvred to obtain the scaled fishing rights. With the scaled fishing rights come the power and the obligation to manage the fisheries.



Map of part of the Meuse river, the Netherlands

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Members of the Dutch Association of Artisanal Inland Fishers fishing for eel. Netherlands' professional fishers are willing to take up the challenge of fisheries management

participation of representatives of professional fishers, anglers and water managers. The Department of Fisheries is not participating yet. Irrespective of the fishing rights, anglers and professional fishers should formulate common management objectives, including setting separate targets for harvests by anglers and professional fishers. The FMBs should also see to it that agreements, based on the objectives, are enforced. The process of arriving at a management plan is slow and involves many experiments where, through trial and error, a workable management system will hopefully evolve.

Currently, the Netherlands Professional Inland Fishers Organization is pushing the Fisheries Department to take final responsibility for the management agreements, a responsibility that, until now, they did not wish to take up. However, without a central authority that can compel parties to look beyond short-term profits and acquired fishing rights, the idea of different stakeholders coerced into an FMB jointly managing the fisheries will remain a fantasy. 3

Owning these rights, instead of the mere right to issue fishing permits to anglers, makes a huge difference. With the lease contract, control could be exercised over the professional fishers fishing for scaled fish.

At present, a very complicated legal arrangement governs the Rhine river estuary. On the one hand, it is the government that is responsible for the day-to-day management of the fisheries using professional gear. On the other, it is the organizations of anglers that are made responsible for the management of the scaled fisheries. They cannot seriously practise the management responsibility since they are not the ones regulating the professional fishing gear that catch the scaled fish. (Whether, if allowed to, these organizations could actually regulate the catch of the tens of thousands of anglers fishing with rods, is a question that can be tackled only in another article.)

The professional fishers also dislike the situation. They feel they are much more capable of managing the fisheries than the anglers and their organizations, and are willing to take up the challenge.

The government has now embarked on a project in which bigger areas, such as a province or a large water body, are managed by fisheries management boards (FMBs). This is a kind of co-management system with the

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