

At a Crossroads

The integration of England's small-scale fisheries within a national quota management system could well spell disaster

An intermittent war of words is being waged in the columns of the well-respected journal, *Fishing News*, over the future governance of small-scale fisheries in England. The arguments initially set small-scale against large-scale fishing interests but have more recently exposed divisions within the small-scale sector over the representation of their interests and appropriate courses of action in defending their increasingly vulnerable status. This is symptomatic of the mounting pressures on small-scale fisheries and

allowable catches were increasing year on year.

The background to the proposal is revealing. Prior to legislation for the registration of buyers and sellers introduced in 2006 as part of a campaign to clamp down on illegal landings of fish in the UK, the landings of under-10-m vessels had been largely unquantified. Implementation of the legislation revealed unexpected volumes of quota-regulated species caught by small, mainly inshore boats intended, in part, for informal sale to local retail outlets and the largely seasonal hotel and restaurant trade. Landings were well in excess of the quota allocated to the under-10-m quota pool, managed by the fisheries department, and exposed a substantial gap between the available quota and the level of landings needed to keep the sector viable.

The under-10-m sector numbers around 2,500 vessels or 80 per cent of the English fleet, accounting for 16 per cent of gross tonnage and 47 per cent of kw engine capacity. But it receives less than five per cent of the total quota. The importance of quota-regulated species may, at first glance, appear rather slight.

Non-quota species

Around 70 per cent of earnings by the under-10-m fleet come from non-quota species, principally crab and lobster. There are, however, some significant areas of inshore fishing activity—especially along England's south coast—where relatively small quantities of high-value demersal species, such as sole, make a sizeable contribution to the revenues of the under-10-m fleet

The current disputes were sparked off by a decision of the UK fisheries minister to accede to pressures from within the small-scale sector for additional fishing opportunities.

a growing nervousness over an uncertain future, especially when confronted by a government intent on simplifying complex issues and seeking to impose economically rational solutions. It is a situation found widely in Europe today.

The current disputes were sparked off by a decision of the United Kingdom (UK) fisheries minister to accede to pressures from within the small-scale sector for additional fishing opportunities. In 2011 he proposed transferring three per cent of the quota presently allocated to over 10 m vessels and managed by producer organizations (POs) on behalf of their member vessels. The government's contention was that this fish is currently "unfished"; the quota transfers were to be restricted to stocks where total

This article is by **David Symes** (dg@dgsymes.karoo.co.uk), Reader Emeritus, University of Hull, UK

and are crucial to its continuing economic viability.

Since 2008, the small-scale sector has sought to overcome shortages of quota through purchases or gifts of unused quota from the POs. Unsurprisingly, the minister's proposal to top slice the POs' quota allocation met with opposition, withdrawal of informal trade between the POs and the small-scale sector and the threat of legal action.

The problems facing the small-scale sector go much deeper than shortfall in quota. Externally, the sector is meeting increased competition for access to marine space from other users and the threat of further regulation through marine spatial planning. In addition to established uses such as dredging for sand and gravel and the extraction of oil and gas, there are new demands from renewable energy installations, including tidal power generation—still in its infancy—and the much more extensive wind farms. These will place large areas of nearshore waters off limits to fishing.

A bigger threat comes from developments in the protection of the marine environment. A large tranche of marine conservation zones (MCZs) proposed by Natural England, the statutory conservation agency, and currently under consideration by government, will sit alongside the existing network of European marine sites. Were all 127 candidate MCZs to be approved, some 34 per cent of England's inshore waters would be affected. To date, the government has decided to proceed with only 31, though further action may follow. Concern over the surge in designations is heightened by uncertainty over which activities will be permitted inside the protected areas. Conservation groups are pressing for strict regulation of fishing, and there are rumours concerning the regulation of some European marine sites as 'no-take' zones. The industry could face the possible closure of local fishing grounds.

Compensation for the potential loss of inshore fishing grounds is

hard to find. Scope for diversifying small-scale fishing enterprise is limited, though the burgeoning coastal tourism and leisure industry does create new opportunities in ecotourism, recreational fishing and heritage-related ventures. Domestic demand for good-quality, locally sourced fish and shellfish remains fairly buoyant even in times of austerity but quayside prices generally are depressed by high volumes of imported fresh and frozen fish that account for around two-thirds of the local fish supplies. Expanding sales beyond the coastal markets remains a problem where the volume of landings—typically small and irregular—occur at the start of a lengthy distribution chain linking producers and end consumers. Innovative systems of processing, distribution, and marketing are needed in a country where co-operatives are rare and membership of POs is largely confined to over-10-m vessels.

More pervasive threats to the long-term viability of small-scale fisheries stem from the fisheries administration's recent surge of interest in managing the sector. Throughout the UK, fisheries administrations have been reluctant to engage directly with the way small-scale fisheries are governed. They have been afflicted by a

JEREMY PHILLIPSON / NEWCASTLE UNIVERSITY



Mevagissey port in Cornwall, southwest England, one of the strongholds of small-scale fisheries in the UK

vague sense of unease at tackling such a diverse set of circumstances and intricate relationships that characterize the sector and which seemingly defy simple explanations based on economic rationality: better to let sleeping dogs lie! Over the last 10 years, however, the fisheries administration has shown a surprising appetite for intervention.

For well over a hundred years, responsibility for managing inshore fisheries in England and Wales has been delegated to regional Sea

...concerns had been raised over the related threats to the future sustainability of inshore fisheries in England...

Fisheries Committees (SFCs) in what must be one of the earliest forms of fisheries co-management in Europe. The 12 SFCs brought together representatives of the local civil authorities and fishing industries with powers to regulate fisheries initially within three nautical miles of the coastline but later extended to six miles. Local byelaws were used to limit the size of vessels operating in the inshore zone, restrict the type and size of fishing gears and impose minimum landing sizes for a range of fish and shellfish species. Regulating Orders were used to manage shellfish beds, regulate the length of the harvest season, impose daily bag limits *inter alia*. Enforcement of regulations was undertaken by a complement of land-based and seagoing fisheries officers with—in recent times—each SFC having at least one patrol vessel at its disposal.

This system served the interests of inshore fisheries and the local fishing industries remarkably well. However, it came under increasing pressure towards the end of the 20th century, when its remit was extended to include duties relating to environmental conservation. A major refit was necessary and in 2011, SFCs were replaced by Inshore Fisheries and Conservation Authorities (IFCAs). Outwardly, the

new organizations look much like their predecessors: their boundaries are largely unchanged, except for Wales, which chose to bring inshore management under the direct control of its fisheries department; the system of regulation is unaltered apart from the introduction of emergency byelaws and provisions for limiting fishing effort. And the principle of co-management is upheld, though there is a significant shift in the balance of membership on the executive committees favouring wildlife conservation interests at the expense of commercial fishing. This has alarmed many in the inshore industry and prompted the question of whether the primary role of IFCAs lies in fisheries management or in environmental conservation.

If modernizing the locally devolved system of inshore management was seen as long overdue, the decision of the central government to abandon its *laissez-faire* approach in favour of direct intervention was less predictable. True, concerns had been raised over the related threats to the future sustainability of inshore fisheries in England: latent capacity in the form of inactive or underused licences and the lack of effective measures for capping fishing effort especially in the shell fisheries. Both issues could have been tackled in the new legislation governing inshore management. A more plausible explanation was the emergence of the so-called ‘super under-10s’, where the fishing capacity of a much larger vessel was squeezed into the constraints of an under-10-m vessel. These boats, numbering around 150 or so and responsible for a considerable share of both fin and shellfish landings by the small-scale sector, are further proof of the argument that small-scale fisheries cannot be meaningfully defined by simple numerical parameters.

Informal consultation

In 2008, the government began a long, and largely inconclusive, informal consultation with the small-scale sector. Over the next four years, the scope of the consultation

was widened considerably from an initial discussion of a limited decommissioning scheme for under-10-m vessels targeting the high-catching vessels and a restructuring of the licensing system to limit the threats from latent capacity, to a much more fundamental reform of quota management. At the heart of this switch was a projection of two polarized views of future management by a stakeholder-led inquiry (Sustainable Access to Inshore Fisheries or SAIF). One envisaged the integration of small-scale fisheries within a national quota management system (QMS); the other was based on segregation with the under-10-m fleet granted exclusive access to inshore waters (0-6 nautical miles or nm) and the newly formed IFCAs assuming responsibility for managing quota. While the small-scale sector lent its qualified support to the latter option, the National Federation of Fishermen's Organisations (NFFO), representing the wider fishing industry, with 60 per cent of its member vessels over 10 m, came out strongly in favour of the integrated model.

The government finally launched its own formal consultation in 2011. Its proposals laid bare an underlying objective of rolling out a single unified QMS for the English industry in which market mechanisms are expected to play a major role in shaping the future development of the industry. Individual transferable quotas would be allocated to under-10-m vessels electing to join a PO. For those vessels opting out of such a move, the remaining under-10-m quota would be used in the form of non-transferable quota to establish self-managing Community Quota Groups (CQGs), though vessels with dormant or fully latent licences would receive no quota entitlement. More alarming for the future viability of the small-scale sector as a whole was a proposal to extend the QMS to include both lobster and brown crab, two prime targets for the under-10-m fleet.

The fisheries department may have miscalculated the mood of the small-scale sector over the reform of quota management. Certainly, the results of the consultation left the government's proposals in disarray. Overall, the level of response was low and difficult to evaluate beyond a clear recognition that among the small-scale sector there was little enthusiasm for the package of reforms despite the three per cent transfer of quota from the over-10-m allocation to sugar the pill. And there was considerable disagreement over how the small-scale sector's involvement might be managed. The government's reaction has been to reaffirm its intention of introducing a single, unified QMS for England, while leaving detailed decisions on the management of the sector to await the outcomes of trialling three different approaches: incorporating under-10-m vessels within existing POs, establishing a new national under-10-m PO, and setting up local CQGs.

The viability of the government's proposals will, in part, depend on

At the heart of this switch was a projection of two polarized views of future management...

proving the administrative feasibility and cost effectiveness of either of the two new management models. This could prove difficult. The government's preferred option—CQGs—has already run into problems. Of the six trial groups originally selected from among 22 applications, only one group of eight vessels survives: inadequate allocations of quota are blamed for the early demise of the other five. Port-based CQGs with fewer than 20 vessels are unlikely to achieve a critical mass capable of ensuring resilience and flexibility of operation. The alternative—a nationwide PO managing the activities of several hundred small-scale enterprises—

JEREMY PHILLIPSON / NEWCASTLE UNIVERSITY



Sennen Cove port in Cornwall, southwest England.
Small-scale fisheries in England is facing a defining moment

blunter system of output controls. Can these two approaches coexist effectively? In theory, yes—but in practice it is less likely.

Damage would be done by the enforced enrolment of small-scale fisheries into a system designed primarily to rationalize the economic behaviour of its participants. The introduction of fixed-quota allocations to individual vessels, the inclusion of crab and lobster among quota-regulated species and the reduction of latent capacity will undermine the flexibility of operations that allow small-scale enterprises to switch their patterns of fishing according to seasons, availability and market price, on which their famed resilience depends.

It is unlikely that the small-scale sector will be able to resist the government's plans. Its position is weakened by the organizational schisms that beset the sector and cause a dissonant response. Together, the New Under Ten Fishermen's Association (NUTFA) and the NFFO account for less than a third of 10-m vessels while the majority either have no formal representation or are at the mercy of a score or fewer of local associations. The impacts of the new QMS, in terms of local employment and the social renewal of small-scale fisheries, could be dramatic. With fewer job opportunities and restricted access for young fishermen, the fabric of smaller coastal settlements will be further weakened. ³

could face even greater administrative difficulties. A compromise solution of regional quota management groups, with boundaries similar or identical to those of the new IFCAs, has yet to be canvassed.

It is no exaggeration to suggest that small-scale fisheries in England face a defining moment. The skirmishes reported in *Fishing News* have tended to distract attention from the more serious issues, though they have served to underline endemic weaknesses of the sector's organization. The narrative of the last few years suggests a lack of understanding of small-scale fisheries and the variety of aspirations, motivations and life-mode choices that it encompasses.

It raises questions concerning the real agenda of reform. Was it about the sustainability of small-scale fisheries as a distinctive, multi-faceted and socially valuable feature of the coastal economy? Or simply a means of sweeping the problem under the convenient carpet of a universal QMS?

It also highlights a significant shift in the balance between an established devolved approach, applying local ecological knowledge and experience to the development of sensitive technical conservation measures, and a centrally driven sectoral approach employing a much

For more



www.nutfa.org/

New Under Ten Fishermen's Association

www.defra.gov.uk/environment/marine/manage/saif/research/

Sustainable Access to Inshore Fisheries

www.nffo.org.uk/

National Federation of Fishermen's Organisations