

Nordic Think Tank: Drop outdated North Atlantic fishing quotas

The current fishing quotas are outdated and far too often they lead to disputes between the Nordic countries. At the conference of the Nordic Council of Ministers in Tórshavn Tuesday 2 June in the Faroe Islands, the Nordic Marine Think Tank presents a new fishery allocation model that takes more account of actual biological and economic conditions. According to experts, this could put an end to much of the quarrelling between the fishing nations in the region.

On June 2nd, the Nordic Marine Think Tank presents a concrete proposal for how the countries around the North Sea can permanently resolve the conflicts and disputes that have left their mark on fisheries in the North Atlantic in recent years.

Trade bans, complaints lodged with the WTO and suspensions of sustainability certificates are just some examples of the consequences of the disputes between the countries. The perhaps most well-known case is the recent conflict between the Faroe Islands and the EU, which resulted in an EU ban on imports of herring and mackerel from the Faroes. If the Nordic Countries fail to reach agreement they risk losing their position as champions of sustainable fisheries at the detriment the whole fishery sector. The reason for the conflicts is that the principles for allocating fish quotas have not been in line with developments since they were adopted in the 1970s. Fish stocks and the fisheries industry have changed much since then.

The Think Tank, which consists of experts from Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Iceland, Greenland and the Faroe Islands, presents its results in connection with the international conference “Growth in the Blue Bio-economy” in Tórshavn on the development potential in the North Atlantic. The chairman of the Think Tank, Prof. Sten Sverdrup-Jensen from Aalborg University explains:

“The static quota system of the 1970s was a sensible solution at the time. However, fish have changed their area of occurrence since that time, and climate change causes alterations in the ecosystems. We are presenting a dynamic model for quota allocations. That is non-existent today. The model builds on the realities for biological resources and it holds an economic perspective. Moreover, we are proposing a procedure for conflict resolution. The new approach is decisive in seas, which are seeing increasing changes in the size and occurrence of fish stocks.

Need for a new model

The experts have looked closely at the current international rules for allocating fish resources between countries, which provides a good knowledge base for changing the criteria for allocating fishing rights.

“We propose a dynamic and durable allocation system which can be adapted to the developments of the occurrence and size of fish stocks. This also means that there will be a higher degree of allowing a country to fish in the waters of another country for economic reasons. We believe that the focus should be on fish abundance in spawning and nursery areas, the seasonal patterns of fish stocks and fishable sizes” says Prof. Sverdrup-Jensen.

“Only by adopting allocation criteria, which at all times reflect the reality of biological resources and the economy, we can establish the foundation for agreements between nations on quota allocation and the sustainable exploitation of fish stocks,” says Prof. Sverdrup-Jensen.

The objective of the proposal of the Think Tank is to generate a debate on the allocation rules at a time and in an environment, where the only thing you know for sure is that everything is constantly changing.

“If we don’t do things differently, we will continue to see conflicts in the future like those we still have with mackerel between the EU and Norway on the one side and Greenland and Iceland on the other. The conflict is extremely harmful for the international reputation of the Nordic countries as champions for the sustainable management of fish stocks. Such conflicts are not good for everyone involved. They risk damaging the fishing industry as a whole because ultimately the consumers will react negatively. The new model can resolve conflicts before they arise. And this will benefit us all,” said Prof. Sverdrup-Jensen.

Dispute settlement

The Think Tank is also proposing a new model for dispute settlement. At the moment there is no procedure to resolve conflicts other than the parties trying to reach agreement. Not even the EU Common Fisheries Policy has relevant guidelines, which experts consider to be very impractical.

The Thin Tank therefore proposes resolving conflicts through already existing institutions established by the North Atlantic coastal states.

Already in 2004, the North-East Atlantic Fisheries Commission (NEAFC) set up a “fast track” procedure with arbitration panels to settle disputes.

But none of the countries has tried to resolve conflicts through such arbitration panels, even though they all had agreed to set them up. The group of experts proposes that the procedure should apply for all fisheries agreements in the North-East Atlantic and be respected by all the countries.

“Basically the countries just need to use the disputes system they already have agreed on, which is in the interest of everyone.” concludes Prof. Sverdrup-Jensen.

Facts

Existing fish quotas

Fish quotas for the individual North-Atlantic countries are based on a static fixed allocation key based on catches figures from 1971 to 1976. The total allowable catch (TAC) is based on scientific data on fish stocks. For stocks which are shared and managed jointly with countries outside the EU, the TACs are agreed with these countries.

New model for fish quotas

The Nordic Marine Think Tank proposes modernising earlier criteria. Basically, the new model is more dynamic. There is more focus on spawning and nursery areas, on seasonal migration of stocks, and on whether fish are big enough to be caught. Furthermore two other criteria are suggested, i.e. fisheries track-record and the overall significance of fisheries for the economy. Local community issues should not be a factor in international management. Countries should address these issues nationally.

About the Nordic Marine Think Tank

The Think Tank is an association independent of economic interests, political organisations, public authorities, private institutions and business. Its objective is a more informed public debate and media coverage of issues related to the condition of the sea and the sustainable exploitation of the living resources in the sea. The Think Tank has a special focus on the role and significance of fisheries.

Further information:

As of Tuesday 2 June the report can be downloaded from the home page of the Think Tank.

For more information and comments, please contact the chairman of the Nordic Marine Think Tank, Prof. Sten Sverdrup-Jensen on tel. +45 61670978 and by email.

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Prof. Sten Sverdrup-Jensen is chairman of the Nordic Marine Think Tank since 2012. He has more than 30 years' experience with fisheries issues at Aalborg University, the North Sea Centre at Hirtshals and the International Centre for Living Aquatic Resources Management. He has worked in Denmark and internationally in fisheries research, fisheries development, fisheries administration and in particular on institutional aspects.

Peter Ørebech, professor at Norges Fiskerihøgskole, the Arctic University of Norway in Tromsø

Prof. Ørebech is a Norwegian lawyer specialised in marine and fisheries law. He is a professor at Norges Fiskerihøgskole, the Arctic University of Norway in Tromsø. Throughout his career, Prof. Ørebech has had a special interest in how EU law, EEA law and international trade agreements affect Norwegian fisheries management and Nordic sovereignty.