Choose or lose

Few people get to the heart of why the UK’s fisheries are in crisis. The symptoms of devastated fish stocks and overfishing are clear for all to see, but they are not the root of the problem.

The reason why there is a crisis is that we have run down a natural resource – living off capital, not interest – at an accelerating pace over a century or more. Now, with stocks on the brink of collapse and no new fisheries to exploit, we have the following stark choice: whether to spend far more than current budgets allow to fund recovery programmes, or face the very real prospect of the total loss of fish stocks, the fishing industry and the communities that depend on it. This Marine Update summarises a new report from WWF published as part of its Oceans Recovery Campaign (ORCA).

The problem is too severe to ignore any more. Now is the time to seize the initiative and invest in the future of our fisheries and our marine environment. Now is the time to face up to the choice and put in place all the elements needed for the recovery plans – economic, political, environmental and technological. In a way there has never been a more opportune moment to mark the start of sustainable seas around the UK.

A full cost benefit analysis carried out on the recovery plans would show that it makes economic sense. However, it is also necessary to be accountable: socially to the UK’s remote regions where there are few alternatives for prosperity, and morally to future generations who will inherit our environment.

The practicality of and time-scale for successful action is good. If favourable measures are taken, it is reasonable to expect to see a turn-around in the health of fish stocks, and the fishing industry, within 5-10 years. That turn-around could be very significant indeed. One study into the English Channel fishery showed that it could be over 1,500 per cent more profitable if fish stocks were restored. By looking at the history of the fishing ports around the UK, an idea of the potential productivity of the seas can be gained.

The full worth of fish has been undervalued. Most stocks in the UK’s seas have been pushed far below the levels where they can be expected to produce a good economic return or be sustainable. Many fish such as cod and herring naturally live for more than 12 years. Ensuring that they can breed before, or more frequently before, being caught is not just a basic biological requirement but a necessity for long-term viability. Increasing predictability of fish stocks allows forward planning and greater certainty in an industry that has been a by-word for crisis management.

The fishing industry and those concerned about the environment share a common long-term vision of healthy seas and fish stocks and agree that there is no conflict or choice between protecting fish or human communities – the two go hand in hand. It is not possible to predict exactly which stocks will recover fastest – indeed, some may never recover at all, which means that recovery plans must be broadly drawn. On the basis of the provided historical examples from the UK and abroad, and for stocks ranging from herring to cod, evidence suggests that such plans have every prospect of success. However, action must be taken before there are full-blown stock collapses.
It is necessary to get away from the annual round of crisis negotiations. Instead, recovery programmes must be established, centred on medium- and long-term goals, and the specific measures required to deliver these developed. Here, four crucial elements of such recovery programmes are identified: recovery plans, delivery mechanisms, trust and money. Recovery plans are the specific, technical and other measures intended to restore particular stocks, which may include regeneration areas, no-take zones (also known as fishing-free zones), bigger mesh sizes, discard bans, lay-up schemes as well as effective enforcement and deterrent. From historical examples much can be learnt about what measures worked and why others failed. Attempts have already been made to implement such management tools around the UK (elements of the Irish Sea, North Sea, West of Scotland cod recovery programmes and the Northern hake recovery programme) or are planned (pilot fishing-free zones in the Southwestern Approaches).

Delivery mechanisms are the overarching elements for achieving policy goals. In the European Union (EU) the delivery mechanism is the Common Fisheries Policy (CFP). One of the failures of the CFP is the absence of devolved responsibility for managing fisheries at the most local possible scale, with greater empowerment of fishermen, and consequent loss of the incentive to fish sustainably.

Others have done rather better, using different delivery mechanisms. Iceland has gone down the route of private ownership of fishing rights by individuals, fully transferable. Others, such as Norway and the inshore waters of Japan (and also in the UK until recently), have placed a greater emphasis on community ownership and strict control of access to the resource, and fishermen are central to the decision-making process. Lessons should be learnt from the experiences of other countries when it comes to reforming delivery mechanisms in the EU.

Trust, and the need to build upon it, is integral to any recovery plan. Distrust is an endemic and corrosive force. In the past the fishing industry, scientists, managers and environmentalists worked individually and there was a level of mistrust between them. Now they are recognising that they are all working towards the same long-term vision. As a result they are coming together to work out the solutions to the problems of UK fish stocks and the fishing industry. However, one obstacle in their way is the systems failure of the CFP.
- a situation from which individuals or groups cannot extract themselves. Only a reform of the CFP can rectify this.

Money. The simple fact is that any recovery plan will fail unless it has the necessary funding. Whatever the rights and wrongs of the past history of subsidies, fishermen simply cannot now absorb the scale of cuts required - so realistic funding must be a key component of a reformed CFP. WWF does not believe that the time scale for funding current recovery programmes within the CFP (2-3 years), or the overall budget available to Fisheries Ministers, reflect the needs of a medium-term strategy or the investment necessary success. The UK needs to take the initiative and win the case in Europe for action to avoid a fast looming and unprecedented environmental, economic and social crisis.

However, there is a problem – the UK’s past record. It is not generally appreciated that the governments of the UK have failed to make full use of European money available for such recovery plans, inadequate though this may be. In order to access these funds fully, the governments must first place proposals before the Commission and put up match funding. But the UK’s past record for doing this compares very poorly with most other fishing nations in the EU. Between 1995 and 1998 the UK put forward just €25 million, releasing €124 million from the EU. During the same period Spain put up €389 million and Portugal €87 million, and received €1,115 million and €213 million respectively. The fate of both the coastal communities and the fish stocks is in the hands of the financial ministries, principally the Treasury. There is an opportunity now to re-evaluate the fishing industry - to set aside preconceptions, be prepared to invest in recovery programmes, and ease the circumstances for others to invest. Full account must also be taken of the costs of failure to recover the stocks.

Indeed, there is a positive role to play in ensuring that financial disciplines and safeguards are in place. On the one hand, plans are not under-capitalised to the extent that there are no realistic prospects for recovery, but on the other hand public money must be invested in the most efficient manner.

Conclusion

If the governments of the UK invest in the industry now, there is good reason to expect stocks to recover, as will the fortunes of some of our most peripheral communities. Indeed there is every prospect that, in the medium term of 5-10 years, such recovery programmes will become profitable. There is general agreement that a well managed fishery around the UK could generate vastly more income than now - a goal that should be at the core of these recovery programmes. Such funding would not be a subsidy. It is about investment – and indeed the elimination of subsidy. The stocks will be bigger and healthier and the economy and the environment will both benefit.

If investment is not the choice, fisheries will continue to lurch from one short-term crisis to another. Failing to act now will at best be a missed opportunity but, more likely, will lead to a total loss of stocks and destruction of the far-flung coastal communities that depend upon them. In environmental terms we will see the functional extinction of species for which the UK has a unique responsibility in the EU.

Truly, it is time to choose or lose!
WWF recommends that:

- the UK Treasury commits itself to investing in recovery programmes for fisheries, before the package of measures is finalised, so that decisions on the management of fisheries and the dependent coastal communities are not based on short-term survival but on medium-term recovery and long-term sustainability;

- the governments of the UK commit to and deliver regionally-based recovery plans that involve a package of measures such as closed areas, bigger mesh sizes, scrapping vessels and lay-up schemes.

**WWF’s Oceans Recovery Campaign** (ORCA) is calling for a network of regeneration areas to enhance and restore fish stocks, including the piloting of fishing-free zones alongside a stronger network of Marine Protected Areas in the UK. In the longer term, WWF wants to see the introduction of an Oceans Act to provide the best legislative support for managing and protecting the marine environment for wildlife and people.

**OCEANS RECOVERY CAMPAIGN**

www.wwf-uk.org/orca

Based on Choose or Lose (2000) by Malcolm MacGarvin and Sarah Jones with input from George Baxter, Anthony Field, Mathew Davis and Siân Pullen. The full report can be found on WWF’s Ocean Recovery Campaign website: www.wwf-uk.org/orca/info.htm