



Mark Carwardine's Wild Thoughts

If our fish stocks – and our fishing industries – are to be saved from extinction, politicians must encourage everyone involved to think long-term.

As I write, European ministers have met for their annual three-day brawl over fisheries quotas for the year ahead. And once again, under intense pressure from the fishing industry, they have failed to take advice from scientists and refused to cut quotas drastically enough to save fish stocks.

Ministers debate recommendations made by the European Commission on the basis of scientific advice from the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea (ICES). ICES co-ordinates and promotes marine research in the North Atlantic and its advice is based on the work of no fewer than 1,600 marine scientists from 19 different countries.

For the fourth year running, ICES made its position on cod stocks, in particular, crystal clear: "cod stocks in the North Sea, Irish Sea and west of Scotland remain well below minimum recommended levels and the advice for these stocks... is zero catch." In the Commission's own words, many European cod stocks are in a "truly alarming" state. So what did it do? It ignored all the warnings and recommended a mere 15 per cent reduction in catch. The ministers, in their infinite wisdom, agreed.

Europe's refusal to provide adequate protection for cod and other fish stocks is a green light for more overfishing. But even these lacklustre efforts have not been well received by fisheries' leaders and politicians with fleets to protect.

It wouldn't be quite so bad if the fishing industry actually abided by the paltry regulations. But it doesn't. In July last year, the European Court of Justice

fined France 20 million euros (£14 million) for failing to enforce EU rules on mesh sizes and for catching undersized fish. Six months later, almost the entire fleet in the Yorkshire port of Whitby was fined for failing to declare all of its catch. And according to ICES, an astonishing one-quarter of Irish Sea catches have gone unrecorded.

Politicians, conservationists and the fishing industry have different perspectives and agendas. Conflict is inevitable. But their ultimate goal is broadly the same: to get the most fish out of a stock without taking so many that its future is compromised.

The problem is the short-term, year-by-year system of annual management. There is no long-term stability. The fishing industry can't plan for the future (how can fishermen invest in new gear when they could be banned from fishing the following year?) and conservationists complain that all we're doing is fire-fighting (trying to avoid imminent disaster rather than tackling the need to rebuild fish populations over time).

The European Commission is increasingly aware of the need for a better, long-term approach to fisheries management, and ICES recognises the need for more information on what could happen to fish stocks in the next decade, not just the next year.

The harsh reality, though, is that European ministers must act on scientific advice. They must cast aside fears for their short political careers and encourage the fishing industry to think ahead. With 80 per cent of commercial fish species in EU waters now below safe biological limits or classified as being at risk of overfishing, they can't put off the inevitable.

Mark Carwardine is a zoologist, radio presenter and writer.