

Growing pressure

Although not a fish-eating nation itself, the Netherlands' fisheries are experiencing strains, particularly on the export-oriented sector

The Netherlands has a legal 20-km exclusive zone for the small-scale fishery sector, comprising trawlers of less than 300 hp and averaging 150 hp. In the north of the country, this zone falls within the borders of the Waddenzee.

This, on the one hand, is partly a bird and flora sanctuary and, on the other, one of the most polluted seas of northern Europe, thanks primarily to industrial waste from Germany.

At the bottom of the Waddenzee, near the coast, there is a large stock of natural gas. This is one of the major items of export from the Netherlands, especially to countries of the former Soviet Union.

For many years, there had been a slowdown in the growth of gas exploitation due to environmental reasons like the sinking of the sea bottom.

Now, however, there is growing pressure on the government from oil companies like Shell to lift the ban on further exploitation for gas.

In view of the usual financial crisis of the government and the shortsightedness of politicians, it seems that these oil companies will win rights of exploitation.

Greenpeace and other environmental action groups have organized a protest campaign against this selfish business of companies like Shell and others. The campaign is supported by fishermen's organizations and has drawn good response from the public.

While the government has still not decided on the matter, it is visibly alerted by public opinion. This is because the general elections are nearing and the environmental issue is at present one of

the most sensitive political issues in the Netherlands.

After a campaign by small-scale fishermen, marine biologists and environmental activists, the EEC Council for Fisheries had, in 1989, founded a sanctuary in the North Sea, close to the Netherlands, for plaice, one of the victims of overfishing.

This sanctuary, called the 'Plaice Box', was not initially very successful, since the big trawlers continued their overfishing practices in the surrounding areas.

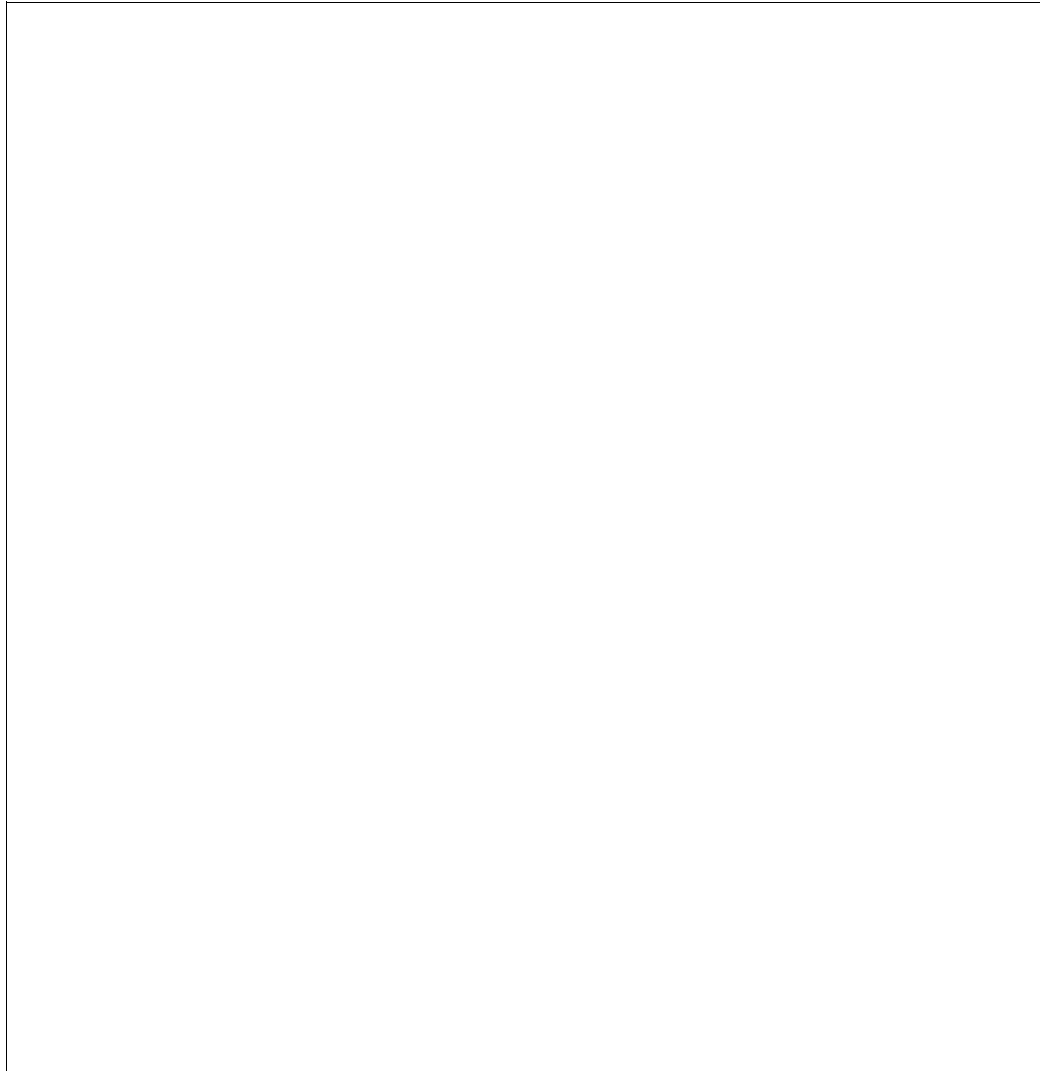
Furthermore, the Plaice Box was closed for only a few months in the year, during the prawn season, and as soon as it was opened, all the huge trawlers rushed in and 'cleaned up' the place within a few days, leaving nothing for the small-scale fishermen.

The small-scale fishermen's organizations and Greenpeace are now campaigning for a closure of the Plaice Box for the whole year and for allowing only the small-scale sector to fish in the Box during a few months of the year.

At present, fish prices in the Netherlands are among the highest in Europe. This is in contrast to France, where cheap fish from eastern Europe is dumped. One reason for the high price is the strict control on the quotas of the Dutch fishermen.

Plenty of imports

This has resulted in a decline in supply of fish in the Dutch market. As there is a great demand for fish, the Netherlands now has to import plenty of it. Otherwise the price of fish would rise further. Most of the fish is bought by the processing industries which re-export them mainly to Spain and



France, where the large, particularly for high-quality fish.

The largest shrimp processing industry in Europe is situated in Groningen, in the north of the Netherlands.

The industry here too imports prawns from Malaysia and Sri Lanka in Asia and then takes them, along with the prawns from the Netherlands, to Poland and the Baltic states to be peeled.

This is for two reasons. The first is because the labour costs of women workers in these countries are much lower. The second reason has to do with laws on hygiene and the environment, which are supposedly more lax than in the Netherlands.

So, even though the Netherlands is not a fish-eating nation, it is a 'good' trading nation. ♣

This piece is by Netherlands-based Cornelia Quist formerly a co-ordinator of ICSF's Women in Fisheries programme