

Mackerel Mayhem

The ongoing dispute in northern Europe over the boom in mackerel stocks and their transboundary migration has implications for the future of the fishery

How should fisheries management respond when stocks fluctuate unexpectedly upwards and fish migrate across boundaries? What are the rights of coastal States when they receive such an unexpected bonanza? What steps must be taken to ensure that the rights of existing operators are respected, that there is a fair allocation of access to fisheries resources, and that responsible fishing prevails?

These bothersome questions comprise the conundrum currently facing scientists, fishery managers and politicians in northern Europe over mackerel stocks that recently boomed and migrated into Icelandic waters and other areas in vast numbers.

In August this year, newspaper headlines proclaimed a fish war over

the meeting came to a close with no agreement reached.

For many years, the mackerel fishery in the northern part of the North Atlantic has been divided between the Faroe Islands and Norway, with Ireland, the United Kingdom (UK), Denmark and The Netherlands being the main mackerel-catching nations within the EU.

Things had been uneasily stable for a long time, at least as far as mackerel stocks were concerned, although reaching international agreements on species that migrate across arbitrary borders that humans draw on maps has never been easy. When Atlanto-Scandian herring re-appeared in catchable volumes in the 1990s, for instance, it took several years before an uneasy truce could be reached—which subsequently lapsed before the rift could be shored up again—while management of blue whiting took decades of meetings to fructify.

In addition, consider also the horse mackerel fishery that Norway shares with the EU, and the capelin that migrates around Iceland, which Norway, Greenland and the Faroe Islands have interests in too. The pelagic complex of fisheries as a whole is far from simple, particularly as it becomes increasingly clear that there are correlations between the different species as they tend to compete for some of their feed sources.

Reduced fishery

Right now, mackerel is at its peak in terms of stocks, while blue whiting is at a low point, with the fishery for 2011 reduced by more than 90 per cent, and

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mackerel in northern Europe. This followed Iceland's gatecrashing entry into the mackerel fishery and the angry response it provoked amongst European Union (EU) and Norwegian operators and politicians.

A meeting held in London at the end of October this year sought to swing the spotlight on mackerel as the coastal States with interests in catching this fast-swimming, high-value species gathered in an attempt to reconcile their practically irreconcilable differences. Yet, despite eerily familiar utterances,

This article is by **Quentin Bates** (fnifeatures@ukonline.co.uk), Technical Editor at *Fishing News International*, published by *IntraFish Media*

QUENTIN BATES

there are signs that Atlanto-Scandian herring stocks may be declining too.

It has been a few years since mackerel showed up around Iceland in enough numbers to start appearing on barbecues. It has been only a very few years since there was enough to see a sizeable commercial fishery develop with startling rapidity, but that is what has happened—and an unholy row with Iceland's neighbours has been brewing since the first big catches were landed by the Icelandic fleet.

For several years, there have been very heavy concentrations of mackerel in Icelandic and Faroese waters as this migratory species has expanded north and west beyond the edges of its usual migration patterns. Fishermen report that mackerel stocks in Icelandic waters are virtually impossible to avoid, even when fishing with bottom trawls that otherwise rarely take more than a handful of pelagic fish.

To begin with, the high volumes of mackerel taken as a by-catch with the usual summer fishery on Atlanto-Scandian herring were a nuisance. As a new species for Iceland, there was no framework for handling it, and so mackerel went mostly for fishmeal. Some smaller operators were quick off the mark to catch mackerel with handlines and did well on this new fishery, while the main part of the pelagic industry struggled to adapt—but did so rapidly.

The values also became apparent quickly. While landings initially went for fishmeal production, it did not take long for the big players of Iceland's highly vertically integrated fishing industry to find techniques for producing mackerel for human consumption.

Iceland set itself a 130,000 tonne quota for 2010 (as it had in 2009)—to the abject fury of the Norwegian and EU mackerel fishermen. The quota announcement was made ahead of the meeting in late 2009, at which the established mackerel-fishing nations would set their annual allocations—ostensibly so that they could take Iceland's fishery into account.



A Norwegian purse seiner, part of the fleet run by independent operators, often on a family basis with crew drawn from the local community

In the event, the mackerel nations set something close to their usual quotas for the year—alongside a virtually unrestricted fishery taking place next door. The Faroese fisheries minister, Jacob Vestergaard, came under increasing pressure to follow Iceland's lead by setting an autonomous Faroese quota, and jeopardizing existing agreements between the Faroe Islands, Norway and the EU.

Vestergaard has been under pressure from both directions—firstly, from operators without mackerel quotas who saw an abundant and untapped resource as well as an influx of a hungry predatory species that could prey on the juveniles of their normal demersal target species of cod, haddock and saithe; and, secondly, from the established Faroese operators who held mackerel quotas and who were opposed to leaving the agreement.

Fishery quotas

The Faroese government followed Iceland's 130,000-tonne lead by announcing its own 85,000-tonne fishery in Faroese waters. The fish were easy enough to catch, and the quota was finished by autumn over a summer that bristled with difficulties. One Faroese pelagic vessel was forcibly prevented from landing its catch in Peterhead by furious Scottish fishermen.

Mackerel are a very valuable species, particularly on the highly demanding Japanese market, but their value is also strictly linked to the optimum fat content and condition, which are formed during the winter months—when the fish have migrated firmly into EU and, mainly, Norwegian waters. The established Norwegian, Faroese and EU mackerel fishing operators have reciprocal rights that allow them access to

What had once been a fairly lawless fishery has been rigorously brought under control over the last 15 years.

mackerel in Norwegian waters at the time of the year when they are at their most valuable, as well as access to mainly Norwegian processors who bid fiercely for the highest-quality catches destined for Japan.

Crucially, Iceland has no access to winter mackerel in Norwegian waters; so the large amounts of mackerel frozen this summer for human consumption in Iceland are for the relatively low-cost eastern European markets, and thus the established Faroese operators could see themselves losing access to the fishery that is the mainstay of their operations.

For 2010, the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea (ICES) recommended a 572,000-tonne total allowable catch (TAC), which, it is now clear, has been significantly exceeded. Landings by the coastal States of Norway, the Faroe Islands and the EU came to 800,000 tonnes, to which can be added the 130,000 tonnes caught by Iceland.

For next year, ICES has recommended a 672,000-tonne TAC, and it seems a foregone conclusion that this will be exceeded in much the same way, if no agreement is reached.

The recriminations arising from the mackerel war have been deafening. Politicians on all sides have protested volubly about the situation. Iceland has been vilified, and the Faroe Islands

condemned for their actions this year. In particular, Iceland, which is still in the throes of a drawn-out economic crisis, has protested that it has a right to catch its own fish in its own waters.

The Icelandic fisheries minister, Jón Bjarnason, has more than a few times reiterated his government's position that Iceland can justify its mackerel fishing, and that this will continue, as have other government and industry figures in Iceland. The EU Fisheries Commissioner, Maria Damanaki, has taken a bullish stance, while various political figures in Norway, Scotland and elsewhere have not been shy to condemn the position taken by Iceland and the Faroe Islands. The media have not been far behind either, lapping up calls by Scottish Members of Parliament (MPs) and Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) for Icelandic and Faroese exports to be boycotted.

The amounts of money involved are not small. The annual mackerel fishery is worth an estimated Euro 600 mn; so the heat of the debate is understandable. The anger is equally easy to fathom. What had once been a fairly lawless fishery has been rigorously brought under control over the last 15 years, largely at the instigation of Norwegian operators who saw their markets under threat. While there are undoubtedly a few tonnes of black-market mackerel landed here and there—and some UK operators are currently being investigated—the majority of the industry in Norway, the Faroe Islands and the EU has already been through the painful process of seeing its mackerel fishery severely curtailed and restricted. It thus appears understandable that the sight of what is practically a restriction-free fishery taking place next door-but-one cannot be anything but galling.

Deep suspicions

There is, particularly in Norway, a deep suspicion of Iceland's motives in allowing a mackerel fishery to take place on such a scale. The Norwegian fishing industry feels that it has already had its fingers burned in past dealings with Iceland, such as when

Icelandic trawlers began fishing in the Barents Sea Loophole and came away with a groundfish quota on Norway's doorstep. The race for blue whiting saw the Icelandic pelagic fleet concentrate on this fishery to build up a strong track record in a few short years of fishing, and the Norwegian view is that Iceland's tactics also secured it an unjustifiably large share of the TAC.

For the Norwegian pelagic business, the mathematics are simple enough. A two per cent share of the mackerel TAC given to a newcomer like Iceland means that the equivalent of two Norwegian pursers lose their income.

The fact of the case is that Iceland had knocked repeatedly at the door of the coastal States to ask for a mackerel quota in the past, but had found itself repeatedly rebuffed on the grounds that with no mackerel in its waters, it could stay outside the club. Iceland claims to have been excluded illegally from the mackerel club. Norway points to its own long track record of fishing mackerel, which was a marginal species in the 1970s.

There are justifiable and understandable standpoints on all sides and it should not be imagined that all is peace and harmony inside the mackerel club. A squabble between the EU and Norway last year was resolved after several months, much to Norway's advantage, EU fishermen would claim.

Negotiations are certainly not an easy process. Reaching agreements between nations on other stocks have been long drawn-out affairs fraught with difficulty, and they have never been reached easily. In the case of blue whiting, for instance, talks had been going on for close to 20 years and no real urgency was seen until alarm bells began to ring on the state of the stock, and the industry itself began to discreetly push for movement.

It is worth asking what would happen if Iceland's valuable capelin fishery were to shift its migration into a new pattern that allowed Norwegian and EU vessels to take part in a quota-free bonanza. Would the EU

and Norwegian governments take immediate steps to curtail the activities of their fleets once Iceland began to complain? That does not seem likely. Would the Icelandic government and industry accept the situation with a resigned shrug of the shoulders, and reduce its quotas to accommodate the newcomers? That seems an even more far-fetched idea.

There are some who will admit privately that Iceland should have been allowed into the coastal States' mackerel club years ago, with a small quota, in which case there would have been a structure within which to address the recent huge increase in mackerel in Icelandic waters. There are also reports that Iceland could have had a share of the mackerel TAC



Fresh-caught mackerels. An unholy row over mackerel stocks has developed in North Atlantic waters

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as long ago as 2009, but for the flat refusal of its negotiators to settle for anything less than a fifth of the fishery it had only just embarked on.

Large operators

However, the spectacle of Icelandic operators shovelling up generous volumes of a shared stock on their own terms in a fishery dominated by a small group of large operators does

Might Is Not An Access Right

The EU-Iceland spat over mackerel highlights the flaws of basing access on historic catches, especially for migratory stocks

The last time there was a disagreement with Iceland over rights to resources in Icelandic waters, the British government sent in naval gunboats in what became known as the 'cod wars'. The current war of words over mackerel raises similar issues about who should have priority access to fish stocks: coastal States and their communities or those with historic catch records?

Does the recent migration of mackerel stocks into its waters give Iceland a legitimate right to catch them and set their own quota? The Federation of Icelandic Fishing Vessel owners say it does. According to them: "The mackerel are in Icelandic waters and belong to us". In response, Scottish pelagic fishing interests demanded a European Union (EU) blockade of Icelandic and Faroese ships and goods, accusing Iceland and Faroe Islands of plundering mackerel stocks.

But this is certainly not a David-and-Goliath combat. It is all about powerful industrial fishing operations battling it out to get as much access as they can to highly valuable fish stocks. It may be that large pelagic trawlers and purse seiners are a most effective way to tap into these booming mackerel stocks and transform them into wealth through fishmeal or high value export markets. But hardly equitable, and potentially hugely unsustainable given their voracious appetites; access to resources should first and foremost be determined by the capacity of fleets to deliver environmentally, socially and economically sustainable fishing. Smaller-scale fishing and ancillary shore based

nothing for Iceland's cherished image as a responsible fishing nation. At the beginning of this year, the organization that represents the interests of these vessel operators busily pilloried the minister for his decision to allow an additional quota of monkfish to mainly the smaller end of the fleet, and the opening of a summer coastal fishery outside the established quota system. However, it apparently saw nothing unsustainable about contributing to taking more than 100,000 tonnes of mackerel against scientific advice.

Pelagic stocks across the North Atlantic are part of a complex that is not fully understood. It seems, however, that there is a delicate interplay between the cyclical rise of one species as another declines in strength, and the effects of even small changes in sea temperatures and access to feed.

But taking into account the experience of the fickleness of these stocks, it seems remarkable, with hindsight, that the possibility does not appear to have been entertained that mackerel could shift their migration patterns that far west.

It has happened before, although not in living memory. There are records

that indicate the presence of boiling shoals of mackerel in remote Icelandic fjords a century ago, which echo today's reports of abundant mackerel in Iceland and the Faroe Islands, as there are further reports of starving seabird populations brought on by the lack of sand eels. The possibility is too strong to be overlooked that the sheer bulk of migrating mackerel has displaced the vulnerable sand eel.

That appears to be the way nature works. Marine species never exist in a state of stability—making a mockery of the whole idea of maximum sustainable yield (MSY) across all stocks, an idea so beloved of office-based bureaucrats. One stock gains strength at the expense of another in what can be seen, with hindsight, as predictable regularity, in the case of some stocks.

Trawl sampling

Research carried out this summer in a combined effort by Norwegian, Faroese and Icelandic research bodies concluded that there is mackerel everywhere across the North Atlantic. The results of trawl sampling indicated a 4.5-mn tonne mackerel stock, while acoustic surveying hints at a stock in

operations are much more effective in generating local employment, supplying local markets, and generally spreading the benefits in a more equitable way.

Such operations are also far more flexible in switching between stocks, and have a lower environmental footprint. Ensuring sufficient access to migratory and other stocks should be the priority, be they in EU waters or elsewhere. This principle is equally applicable to stocks of tuna (tropical and temperate), horse mackerel in the South Pacific or mackerel in the North Atlantic.

Valuable fish stocks often do not respect national boundaries, and, given the increasingly unpredictable trends of climate and temperature, the seasonal migration patterns of fish are proving equally fickle to predict. Under such circumstances, unless space is created for agreement on how access to valuable fish stocks can be shared, accommodating the interests of all different fleets and countries, including newcomers (such as Iceland, in this case), there can be no certain future.

New and just ways must be found for allocating fishery access to shared fish stocks that ensure long-term sustainability and that safeguard the rights of fish-dependent coastal communities. 'Might is right', and 'first come, first served' are not good principles on which to base such access, as is currently the case with using historic catches or 'track records'.

The approach advocated by the Green Group in the European Parliament deserves serious consideration. Their contention is that priority access should not be given to those who fish the most, but rather to fishing operations that contribute most to the local economy, do least damage to the marine environment, and that distribute the benefits from wild fish resources most equitably.

—by *Brian O’Riordan*
ICSF

excess of 12 mn tonnes. The true figure is undoubtedly somewhere between the two, as neither one nor the other of these methods is likely to give a precise answer. The survey also showed that mackerel have spread far to the west of the Icelandic exclusive economic zone (EEZ) in substantial concentrations, which further begs the question of how far mackerel have spread into the Greenlandic EEZ and what implications this could have.

The research report underscores what fishermen have been saying for some years: that mackerel stocks have been gaining strength and that quotas fail to reflect this fact, while scientific advice has verged on the ultra-cautious.

Iceland is demanding a 20 per cent share of the mackerel fishery, a largely unrealistic demand, considering its short history of mackerel landings. But each year that goes by without an agreement means that the track record in the fishery grows in strength and Iceland gains a little more leverage to bargain with.

For the coastal States, it is politically impossible for Iceland to have a larger quota than the five per cent of the

TAC that the Faroe Islands had—at least until this year when the Faroese government bumped its fishery up to 85,000 tonnes.

At the latest meeting in London, a three per cent figure was on the table for Iceland, which was, unsurprisingly, rejected. There is a huge chasm between three per cent and 20 per cent. It remains to be seen how long it will take to reach a consensus of some kind and just how much real will there is for this to happen. Iceland is under no real pressure to sign anything yet. The mackerel issue does have a bearing on the country's application for EU membership—but is only one of a host of matters that need to be cleared up before Iceland may, or may not, decide to join Europe.

As things stand, the small group of fishing vessel owners who are applying as much pressure as they can on the government to push for a maximum mackerel quota also make up the influential lobby that is solidly against EU membership.

Dangerous gamble

For Iceland, this brinkmanship may turn out to be a dangerous gamble. The

mackerel stocks have already migrated north and west—and could well migrate back. Some would say that this is a certainty and it is just a question of when it will happen.

There is also the possibility that, with continuing heavy fishing, the stocks could diminish and would no longer need to migrate as far west, leaving Iceland with no mackerel in its waters; and with no agreements and no access to it in other waters.

For the other parties in the mackerel war, there is a greater urgency. Much of the pelagic fishing carried out by Norwegian and EU vessels is certified by the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC), and the Faroese have also embarked on obtaining MSC certification. The MSC has certainly taken notice of the fact that mackerel have been fished considerably in excess of the scientific recommendations, and has hinted at a withdrawal of certification if the fishery is not managed responsibly. That would be disastrous for any operator or processor trying to sell fish to a western European market where an ecolabel has become a necessity.


Undoubtedly, eventually there will be an agreement and some sort of armistice in the mackerel war. As past experiences of trying to engineer uneasy truces in disputes on herring and blue whiting have shown, the only certainty is that this time around, it will be an agreement that none of the parties will be satisfied with. Fishermen on all sides will feel that they have been let down by their governments, and both owners' and fishermen's organizations will continue to pressure their governments for a better deal.

All those involved in the mackerel war have interests at stake, and all the governments concerned are lobbied hard by their fishing sectors. Also at stake are issues of national interest and national pride—nobody is prepared to back down and then go home to explain why they came away with such a poor deal. Cue: stalemate.

If the many claims—all justifiable in one way or another—are added together, the total is somewhere close to 200 per cent of the mackerel fishery,

with nobody prepared to back down. There are no easy answers, and if, or when, an agreement is reached, the only certainty is that nobody will come away from the negotiating table with much to gloat about.

In the past, fisheries managers did not entertain the possibility of the mackerel shifting westwards. Unfortunately, existing mechanisms for managing highly migratory shared stocks appear to be woefully inadequate. The present system demonstrates just how futile it appears to be to try and manage, on the basis of national flags, stocks of fish that blithely ignore the borders set by humans, especially as each nation's industry understandably lobbies its representatives at the negotiating table into an inflexible position.

It is a tall order to hope for a quick and happy end to the mackerel war, but the experience of seeing just how long these agreements take to reach, and how shaky they are when achieved, indicates that there is a real need for some new ideas with a genuinely international basis for allocating and managing shared stocks. 

For more

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