

Article 4: The End of Blackfish, the Rise of Dead Fish

It is pitch black, 50 kilometres off the Northeast Scottish coastline. A fishing trawl stalls its engine in the North Sea, poised to take direction at any moment. The ship slowly moves in towards the coastline, taking care to avoid the usual route to Peterhead and Fraserburgh markets. On the lookout for patrol boats, the skipper is eager to make it to Invergordon, a port on the north coast, before they discover his enormous haul of illegally caught fish on board. Hours pass, and finally the trawler makes it safely into dock. The crew moves deftly, quietly, as it feverishly unloads the illicit fish bounty onto waiting lorries. After forty-five minutes of backbreaking work, the lorries are filled and they drive off to Grimsby, where they will be sold to dealers who have been waiting for this latest catch.

“That’s what I used to do,” said Mike Park, a retired skipper who now serves on the North Sea Regional Advisory Council. “I’ve been arrested four times in Norway, and 8 times in the UK, for bringing illegal fish in. But that was the only way to beat the quotas and make a living.”

Landing illegal fish, also referred to by industry insiders as ‘blackfish,’ used to be endemic throughout the UK. “One-third of all landings in the UK used to be illegal,” said Dr. Iain Pollard, a fisheries economist at the Marine Resources & Fisheries Consultants. “Fishermen had to go beyond the allotted quotas to make a profit.”

Because blackfish landings are obviously not recorded, it is difficult to know just how many fish were landed in the UK. But it is widely agreed that Scotland was renowned for the illegal fish trade, admits everyone from the former UK Fisheries Minister Elliott Morley to the World Wildlife Fund. “If fishermen can benefit more from illegally fishing, they will,” said Pollard. In the end, fishermen have mortgages and debts, and will not abide by quotas if it stands in the way of a profit. “Fishermen will always act in their own interest,” said Dr. Orrin Pilkey, an oceanography expert at Duke University. “Nothing will change that.”

The blackfish trade, however, had serious and long-lasting impacts upon the larger fishing industry. “If there are more landings of fish,” said Pollard, “the prices that fish sell for will be lower.” He said that blackfish, though lucrative because it enabled fishermen to sell more than their allotted portion of fish per year, usually sold for 10-20% less the market price.

A more serious effect of the blackfish trade still remains. Because thousands of tons of blackfish were landed per year and were not recorded by regulators, these did not enter into scientists’ calculations when they were estimating the amount of remaining fish stocks, and projecting quotas for upcoming years. Due to this information was missing, scientists’ estimates of how many fish remained were often much higher than field observers recorded, and higher quotas than could be sustained were set. Marine conservationists like Dr. Anuschka Miller at the Scottish Association for Marine Science blame this culture of illegal fishing for the predicament fisheries face today.

But the blackfish has been largely wiped out, thanks to the reforms in the 2002 Common Fisheries Policy and an increased effort by Scottish authorities to tackle the problem. Fisheries officers from the Scottish Fisheries Protection Agency are prominent fixtures at both the Peterhead and Fraserburgh markets each morning, while the crackdown on egregious offenders has become a

priority. In 2005, for instance, Shetland skipper John Duncan and his crewman Jerry Ramsay were convicted of landing illegal fish, and were fined £1 million.

Other measures ensured that the blackfish trade was stopped in its tracks in the UK. “The registration of buyers and sellers has helped tremendously,” said Roger May, a fisheries officer at the Scottish Fisheries Protection Agency. Previously, only the fisherman was liable if he was caught bringing illegal fish onto shore. Once he passed it onto a buyer, he was in the clear. Now, both buyers and sellers are held responsible for handling illegal fish. Though the trade has not been completely eradicated, it has much higher penalties than it ever has, and this has turned the fishermen off of the illegal practice. Also, they realize now that the excess availability of fish artificially depressed market prices, and so now are content to land within quota regulations.

Though fisheries enforcement officers are lauding the end of the trade, at least in the UK, the decrease in blackfish landings has resulted in a marked increase in the amount of bycatch and discards in fishing. “What it’s done is translated the problem into a discarding problem. The fish thrown overboard are dead, and this has had a sizable effect on stock mortality rates,” said Dr. Stuart Reeves of the Centre for Environment, Fisheries and Aquaculture Science. “But we have yet to learn how to calculate that effectively.”

According to the Norwegian Ministry of Fisheries, 8.1 million tonnes of bycatch are produced in the cod fishery industry alone. A further 9 million tonnes of bycatch are caught and discarded in the remaining North Sea fisheries. In total, the Norwegian body estimates that 43 million tonnes of seafish were removed from the North Sea in 2006, the most recent statistics show.

The Scottish Fishermen’s Federation has proposed that, by allowing fishermen to catch more, the bycatch and discard problem would be alleviated. They maintain that enabling fishermen to bring a higher percentage of their catch to land would decrease the amount of days needed at sea to meet their quotas, and decrease the percentage of total catch that need to be removed from ship before entering port. “Discarding unwanted fish is ultimately more profitable,” said Pollard, because it protects fishermen from steep fines. “If a fisherman is catching cod, he’s catching a lot of bycatch. And without throwing away the unwanted fish to get the maximum catch value, he’s landing a much lower value” of fish, he added.

There have been pilot regimes initiated in Norway and Iceland to entice fishermen to halve or completely decimate their discard practices. These have succeeded in reducing the amount of fish taken from the ocean, and scientists hope that this will have a positive effect on the marine ecosystem and biodiversity. But it comes at extra cost to fishermen, who have to spend more hours sifting through catches and altering their fishing methods to meet these targets. In the case of Norway, which as a non-member of the EU has negotiated cross-border agreements with member states, this measure may not be as effective as it seems, due to foreign fleets fishing in Norwegian waters. Even though foreign ships are barred from dumping in Norwegian seas, there is nothing to prevent UK and other vessels from dumping immediately outside the border, which they frequently do. Scientists at CEFAS and MRAG have both expressed concern that this massive dumping is having a deleterious affect on the seabed and marine creatures in the vicinity.

As is so often the case in fisheries management, the solution to one problem frequently results in the creation of another serious issue. Environmentalists expressed horror last month when a video, released by Greenpeace, showed a Norwegian fishing boat dumping thousands of tons of unwanted dead fish back into the ocean, by law-abiding fishermen who were following EU quota regulations.

However, fisheries scientists and government ministers alike are searching for an alternative to this distasteful practice. In the meantime, what may be needed is a miracle fishing method which will allow fishers to follow and catch their target species without endangering other fish.

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