

Rt Hon Owen Paterson MP

Fishing Speech

Re-establishing Local and National control of fishing policy will revive our fishing communities and restore our marine environment.

Fish market – Looe, Cornwall

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Check against delivery

Disaster

Eleven years ago I produced an Opposition Green Paper on fishing in which I stated that ‘The Common Fisheries Policy is a biological, environmental, economic and social disaster; it is beyond reform. It is a system that forces fishermen to throw back more fish dead into the sea than they land, it has caused substantial degradation of the marine environment, it has destroyed much of the fishing industry, with compulsory scrapping of modern vessels and has devastated fishing communities’.¹

Despite determined efforts to reform the CFP by the UK Coalition Government, not much has changed. If anything it has got worse.

Awful damage it's done

In a very competitive field, the Common Fisheries Policy is regarded as the EU’s worst ever idea. The Policy has no redeeming features, widely hated by everyone who understands the issues at hand, so bad that it has created almost uniform agreement across the political spectrum. It’s even got Greenpeace and me to agree on something.

My 2005 Green Paper took two years to research and write, and among my findings was that before our entry to the Common Market we had a sustainable, profitable and ecologically sound fishing industry. Unlike the Norwegians, who saw what would happen to their fishing industry if they agreed to the Common Market’s conditions, we threw it away.

There was no golden age of fishing; it has always been a tough, dangerous and gritty job to bring fish to our tables. But since the creation of the Common Fisheries Policy we have had a system of managed incompetence and destruction.

The statistics are eye-watering; in 1995, 9,200 British fishing vessels landed 912,000 tons of fish; by 2002 there were 7,003 vessels landing 686,000 tons. That is a 25 per cent decline in just seven years, and meant the loss of on average one fishing vessel per day. A whole crew losing their livelihood each day.

In that period landings dropped from over 900,000 to just 627,000 tonnes annually, with a value of only £770 million.

But the real contrast has come with imports. By 2012, by which time there were just 6,406 British fishing vessels at work, UK imports reached 638,410 tonnes, valued at £2.6bn, of which just under a third came from our EU neighbours. To make matters a great deal worse, many of them were caught in British waters.²

How did this happen?

How did this happen? Politics. Access to fishing grounds has been dominated by political considerations, on the basis of 'equal access' to what Brussels called a 'common resource'. When we joined, fishing fleets from other EU member states were given proportionately a greater share of the fish allocation in UK waters than the British fleet. This 'Total Allowable Catch' was determined annually during a seedy bargaining session in Brussels.

We can't say we weren't warned. When Britain, Ireland, Norway and Denmark were negotiating to join the Common Market it was realised that 80 per cent of the EEC fish stock would now be in the internationally recognised 'Exclusive Economic Zones' of these four new member states. The Norwegian fisheries minister resigned rather than accept the deal, and when given the vote on whether to join, his countrymen sensibly said 'nei'.³

Effect on environment

Considering this devastating effect on the industry, it's almost an achievement that the Common Fisheries Policy has also managed to be an absolute ecological failure, too.

After 46 years of the CFP, some 80 per cent of European fish stocks are over-fished, compared to just 25 per cent in the rest of the world, and a Union controlling 25 million square kilometers of exclusive fishing grounds now depends on imports for two-thirds of its fish.⁴

At the same time in some fisheries substantially more fish were thrown back into the sea dead than were landed. This was because CFP rules forced fishermen to dump billions of dead fish because they were too small or the wrong species. An estimated million tons of fish a year were thrown back as discards, up to a quarter of all fish caught according to some estimates, with even higher rates in some parts. Two out of every three haddock caught on the west of Scotland were thrown back.⁵

Why overfishing?

Contrary to there being ‘too many fishermen chasing too few fish’, as the European Commission concluded after studying its own failures, the problem is caused by management in allowing overfishing for political reasons.^{6,7}

The heart of the issue, as with all of the various faults in European politics, is a top down approach to solving complex, local problems.

This is a system that produced a grotesque policy based on setting fixed quotas of fish, which forced fishermen to throw healthy fish back into the sea as pollution.

A healthy political system would respond to such madness by adapting, but instead Brussels is absurdly inflexible, something I witnessed myself when I spent a night on a Lancashire trawler, watching thousands of immature plaice being dragged up from the depths, only to be thrown back dead. All because EU rules penalised fishermen if they used larger mesh sizes that would have allowed these fish to escape.

It is hard to believe that sane human beings could defend this system. So what did the Commission do? The UK was at the vanguard of pushing for radical reform and introduced many of the proposals cited in my Green Paper. The keystone of this was a discard ban. With great fanfare this was achieved.

Tragically this has proved unworkable because the fundamental basis of the CFP – the setting of quotas at continental level – has not been

reformed. The practical effect has been that instead of discarding the fish at sea, what are known as the “choke species” (fish without quota) must now be disposed of on land. Some are going to landfill and in Northern Ireland, fishermen have even had to apply for licenses to take discards back out to sea for dumping.⁸

World travel. Tour of the seas

It doesn't have to be this way. In opposition, having been to the Falklands, I followed the trail once made by the Vikings, visiting fishing communities from all around the UK to Norway, the Faeroes, Iceland, Newfoundland, Nova Scotia, and the East Coast of the United States. I saw how so many others do it so much better. For a landlocked Shropshire lad it was a real eye-opener into how modern fisheries polices can deliver prosperous fishing communities and thriving marine environments.

Norway is often cited as a model for Britain after Brexit, and although it would be foolish to say our path will follow any particular country, in terms of fishing policy it shows how it can be done.

Some 80 per cent of Norway's fish are caught in waters shared by the EU, Faeroes, Greenland, Iceland or Russia. This is legally managed through the North East Atlantic Fisheries Commission (NEAFC).⁹ This works within and is bound by the terms of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and subsidiary agreements such as the 1982 Straddling Stocks Agreement and OSPAR Commission for the Protection of the Marine Environment in the North East Atlantic.^{10,11,12}

Norway, like Iceland and the Faeroes, has managed to maintain its fishing catches while at the same time preserving healthy stocks, a trick that depends on up-to-date local knowledge and an ability to respond to changing facts on the ground – or in the sea.

Norway also chairs and administers the Codex Alimentarius Committee on Fish and Fishery Products.¹³ Norway is extremely well informed and well connected when it comes to setting the agenda on world fishing standards. We don't even have a vote anymore.¹⁴

Local control

In contrast, the Commission has always justified the need for the CFP because ‘fish know no boundaries’, a slogan that was taken to legitimise supranational management.¹⁵ However, that is far from the truth. What is

actually the case is that fish do not observe man-made boundaries. They are not open border fanatics.

To take an example, the Norwegian Sea is a 'large marine ecosystem' and is to a great extent self-contained, with limited fish movement between this and adjoining systems.¹⁶ It is a system divided between national boundaries, but the nations in question manage to co-operate under international law.

In contrast the EU has created boundaries that cut across natural ecosystems; just as it is blind to the borders between peoples, so it is with fish. By ignoring these ecosystems the EU makes proper, effective management more difficult.

Future

Protection of the environment is not incompatible with safeguarding the fishing industry. Over-fishing and other abuses damage the marine environment and the long-term economic value of a fishing community. Therefore environmental protection is an integral part of a fisheries policy.

So what would happen if we left?

Properly managed, with carefully devised and targeted controls, our natural resources can be constantly renewed. Efforts to rebuild stock can proceed alongside sensible commercial exploitation. Fishing can provide a good living for fishermen and the communities which support them and rely on them, while satisfying the entirely valid demands of all those who care for the environment.

As an independent fishing nation we would join the North East Atlantic Fisheries Commission, along with Norway, Iceland, Russia, Greenland, the Faeroes and the European Union, cutting out the middle man.

Our policy would be to manage the sea fisheries in UK waters in such a manner as to safeguard the natural environment. We need to rebuild and preserve our fish stocks and marine wildlife, maximise the economic value of exploitable stocks, both in the short and the long term and create a stable, fair framework within which the fishing industry could operate. This would include the recreational fishing sector and tourism.

Effective policy can only be developed with the full co- operation and assent of fishermen, guided by good science, and up to date local knowledge and flexibility.

For example, freed from Brussels, we could remove the hated fixed quota system and replace it with 'days at sea', using the latest technology to carefully manage and track data, as the 56,000 people of Greenland manage but the 500 million-strong European superstate cannot.

We should take measures to prevent discarding. With the careful and agreed use of fishing technology, good net and catching designs, the problem of choke species can be dramatically reduced. We would also have permanently closed areas for conservation and temporary closures of fisheries where necessary. There should be rigorous definition of minimum commercial sizes.

We should also maintain the ban on industrial fishing and order a ban of production subsidies. We need to promote profitability rather than volume.

We should enforce a registration of fishing vessels, skippers and senior crew members; we need effective and fair enforcement, using the latest technology.

Local control

Fisheries cannot be managed successfully on a continental scale; however, it is not enough to simply exchange a bureaucratic system run from Brussels for one run by the bureaucrats in London. National control is not enough, we must have local control too. It must be accompanied by local management systems which have the confidence and trust of the nation and the fisherman who work within them.

Fishing grounds should be held in trust by local communities who have cared for them from one generation to the next.

After we vote to take back control, local people can work with politicians and experts in Belfast, Cardiff, Edinburgh and Westminster to set the framework. The real power will lie with you, the local fishing communities.

23rd June will be D-Day for the British fishing industry. Vote leave on the 23rd and you can be in control again.

¹ Consultation on a National Policy on Fisheries Management in UK Waters. A Conservative Party Green Paper. January 2005.

<http://www.eureferendum.com/documents/fishinggreenpaper.pdf>

² Official statistics drawn from:

http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20140507202222/http://www.marinemangement.org.uk/fisheries/statistics/annual_archive.htm and

<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/uk-sea-fisheries-annual-statistics>

³ Archer, Clive (2005) Norway Outside the European Union: Norway and European Integration from 1994, Routledge, p.46

⁴ Figures as of 2009 – see: http://ec.europa.eu/fisheries/reform/docs/pew_en.pdf Figures vary year-to-year and between ecosystems. See:

http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/maritimeaffairs_fisheries/consultations/fishing-opportunities-2015/doc/com-2014-388_en.pdf For overall statistical data see:

http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Fishery_statistics_in_detail

⁵ Figures as per NEF Report 2011 “Money Overboard”

http://b.3cdn.net/nefoundation/9e98650f0d05588029_bgm6bw3ah.pdf See also:

http://ec.europa.eu/fisheries/documentation/studies/discards/report_en.pdf

⁶ EU authorities consistently blame “too many fishermen”. See for instance, see European Parliament press release: 4 February 2013. <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/news-room/content/20130201STO05560/html/Plenty-more-fish-in-the-sea-MEPs-to-decide-on-best-way-to-tackle-overfishing>

⁷ See also: http://b.3cdn.net/nefoundation/e966d4ce355b7485c1_a7m6brn5t.pdf

⁸ Although ministers said at the time the ban was being negotiated, there would be no expectation of landfill, the Scottish Government acknowledges that some landfill is being carried out. See: <http://www.gov.scot/Publications/2016/03/2058/6> In Northern Ireland, permits are being sought to take material back out to sea to dump it. See: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-35066258>

⁹ <http://www.neafc.org/>

¹⁰ http://www.un.org/depts/los/convention_agreements/convention_overview_convention.htm

¹¹ http://www.un.org/depts/los/convention_agreements/convention_overview_fish_stocks.htm

¹² <http://www.ospar.org/about>

¹³ <http://www.fao.org/fao-who-codexalimentarius/committees/committee/en/?committee=CCFFP>

¹⁴ Currently, the 28 Member States adopt a “Common Position”, whence they are obliged to support that position:

http://ec.europa.eu/food/safety/international_affairs/standard_setting_bodies/codex/index_en.htm

See also: Kaddous, Christine (ed) (2015), The European Union in International Organisations and Global Governance, Hart Publishing, Oxford. P.168.

¹⁵ See for instance, the European Commission’s own explanatory booklet on fishing policy: “Control of activities in the fisheries sector”. ECSC-EC-EAEC, Brussels · Luxembourg, 1996

¹⁶ Norwegian waters, in fact comprise three separate ecosystems: The Barents Sea; the Norwegian Sea; and the North Sea and Skaggeak. For a brief explanation, see:

<http://www.fisheries.no/ecosystems-and-stocks/Ecosystem-status/Status/#.V1LT9dQrKHs>