

Common Fisheries Policy reform: Consistency is key

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Opinion

More abundant fish stocks lead to more profitable fisheries, but inconsistencies in the reform of the Common Fisheries Policy could see less fish in the sea, writes Linnéa Engström.



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What are the lessons we can learn for the future of our Common Fisheries Policy (CFP)? To find the answer, we need to know the direction we're heading and what the challenges are.

Inconsistency leaves the door open to interpretation.

The current regulation sets the objectives for the CFP. One of the articles - Article 2 - talks about ensuring that resource exploitation maintains fish stock populations above levels that can produce the maximum sustainable yield (MSY).

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This is an excellent objective, as it would mean abundant fish stocks, well above current levels for many stocks.

There are many advantages of such abundance, not at least that they are able to fulfil their function in the marine food chain, providing food for some species and eating others.

More abundant fish stocks also bring more-profitable fisheries; if there are more fish, they are easier to catch, so fishing fleets spend less time and fuel to make more money.

Unfortunately, in negotiations with Council and with the support of the Commission, another objective was added to the same paragraph, to “achieve the maximum sustainable yield exploitation rate by 2020”.

“More abundant fish stocks also lead to profitable fisheries; if there are more fish, they are easier to catch, so fishing fleets spend less time and fuel to make more money”

Parliament has often reiterated that the objective of the CFP is to restore and maintain fish stocks at levels above the MSY level.

However, the only way to do this is to keep the exploitation rates below - not at - MSY.

The Commission shifted its position during the negotiations and sided with the Council to add this second objective, which will mean lower stocks than the original proposal.

When it came to implementing this new policy, the Commission phrased its questions in such a way that allows for even more intense fishing.

Fishing above MSY will lead to less fish, lower catches in the long run and less profitable fisheries. New rules without proper control will not deliver.

Another problem with the implementation of the CFP reforms is the landing obligation. This was done for one simple reason: to motivate fishermen to improve their selectivity and to catch only what they want.

The idea was to reduce the vast amounts of fish that even the fishermen themselves complain about having to discard.

This shift from obligatory discards to a landing obligation was morally correct and a logical answer to the waste of throwing perfectly edible fish overboard.

However, for a number of reasons, including poor implementation by the Member States, we haven't seen any of the expected improved selectivity from this change of policy.

Fish are still being discarded in large numbers, and the concept has now become a political battle over how to avoid shutting down fisheries. Different ocean stressors could be included in determining fishing yield.

There is a lot of uncertainty in the current scientific assessments. Global warming, acidification, microplastics and invasive species are only some of the new challenges that can change the base of the food web as well as the health and migration patterns for different fish stocks, with huge implications for fisheries.

Many things can influence the harvesting possibilities and could therefore be factored in when determining MSY.

This would be a way of ensuring a more inclusive precautionary approach when setting Total Allowable Catches and quotas.

About the author

Linnéa Engström is first vice chair of Parliament's Fisheries Committee

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