Why close the Irish Sea to trawlers?

A paper by

The Sea Fishery Advisory Group

Of

The Irish Seal sanctuary

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As the fishing community knows the Irish Sea was once a vibrant mixed stock fishery with many fishing boats, crew and coastal communities benefiting from its rich resources. As boats got larger and more efficient stock became overfished. This combined with a move towards the more profitable *Nephrops* fishery, which forms a major part of the Cod diet meant that while *Nephops* numbers increased due to reduced predation by Cod, more boats used trawling gear to target the *Nephrops*.

The result of this change has been a degradation of the fishery from a healthy mixed stock fishery to a fishery, which is now almost completely dependent on Nephrops. Other fisheries have reported similar situations where *Nephrops* have become the primary target species (The Clyde fishery for example). The F. A.O. has warned fishery managers to consider "Global warming" when making management decisions about fisheries. It is much more likely that a healthy mixed stock fishery, which contains a diverse biodiversity, can survive changing environmental conditions than one dependent on a single species.

Cod stocked declined to the point that the EU introduced a Long-term Management Plan to establish measures to allow for the safe recovery of the cod stocks in the Irish Sea (E.C. reg. 423/2004).

This relied heavily on temporal/spatial exclusion measures to protect the spawning stock and vessel decommissioning to reduce effort. But while it excluded cod fishing from spawning areas it did not exclude vessels fishing for *Nephrops*. Trawling by its very nature is non-selective, so cod were still caught.

Initial plans, which aimed at a recovery rate of 30% each year proved optimistic, and stocks continued to decline. In 2008 a new Long-term Management plan for cod stocks was agreed (E.C. Reg.1342/2008), this new plan relies more on TACs and effort control. Harvest control Rules (HCR) will mean that fishing effort and allowable catches will depend on stock size as assessed stock size and scientific advice. Situations when scientific data is not sufficient or accurate enough to make advice possible is also catered for in the new Plan. The plan also imposes strict penalties on countries whose catches exceed the annual targets (article 12). On a number of occasions already fishing effort and catches have been reduced by 25% year on year, in an attempt to allow cod stocks to recover.

The plan also rewards vessels who can demonstrate that they constantly catch less than 1.5% Cod (article 11), by making them exempt from effort control. At present the only successful application under article 11 has been a fishery which uses the Technical Conservation Measure (T.C.M.) known as the Swedish Grid. However as this ridged inclined panel has bars 35mm apart it can still catch and kill large amounts of undersize fish. By-catch of commercially valuable fish is very reduced but future spawning stock is still at risk, especially if it is used in nursery areas despite the combined use of other T.C.M.s such as square mesh cod-ends.

The Marine Institute considers that the only effective way to rebuild the Irish Sea stock is to have very large initial reductions in fishing mortality. Even greater than the 25% stipulated in the 2008 Long-term Management Plan.

Obviously if TACs and fishing effort are reduced on a continuing basis by 25% for whatever reasons in only four years we reach the point when there is no T.A.C. or effort allowed in the Irish Sea. Irish Sea Fishermen, fisheries scientists and representatives of other interests have no wish to see this happen.

Despite the measures and hardships imposed on the fishing industry over the years there has been little sign that the Long-term Management Plans have had the desired effect. The frustration is added to by the fact that the time lag between scientific assessment at sea and ICES advice to managers. When fishermen at sea claim to see a real improvement in stocks rebuilding, even if this is simply a local improvement it gives hope to all.

At the focus group meeting in Belfast in 2009 we were told that while some fishermen could still locate cod stocks on the Grand Banks prior to its collapse it turned out it was the last of the spawning stocks they were targeting. We know from experience that given the right chances Cod stocks can rebuild quite quickly, as seen in the North Sea. Since we joined the N.W.W.R.A.C. we have seen a number of industry led initiatives proposed such as The Fisheries Science Partnership projects and the Irish Sea Discards Project.

While these initiatives together with the 2009 focus group on the Irish Sea which was held in Belfast have all been laudable, we have not witnessed positive action on these initiatives and some indeed failed to happen at all.

We have continued to see that scientific stock assessments and T.A.C. advise for a number of commercial species in the Irish Sea continues to decline. In a paper we delivered to Working Group 4 on discards in 2006 we called for the exclusion of all non-selective fishing methods from known spawning and nursery grounds to allow for increased recruitment to the spawning stocks and allow juvenile fish to mature before they were harvested. Had this happened in 2007 we believe it is possible that stocks would not now be in the depleted state they are in.

The position is now so bad that we must call for the scientific advice and of the Fisheries Science Service (F.S.S.) of the Marine Institute to be followed. They agree with I.C.E.S. advice that fisheries for cod should be closed until an initial recovery of Spawning stock has been proven. Both scientific bodies warn that a failure to reduce fishing mortality to zero will result in a high risk that stocks will fail to recover.

The Marine Institute advises that only fisheries that can prove a zero by-catch of cod should be permitted. Despite these warnings we continue to see fishermen being allocated a quota for cod in the Irish Sea. Even industry representatives attending Working Group 4 of the N.W.W.R.A.C. have admitted that it is possible that fishermen could soon face a zero quota for many species in the Irish Sea.

Historically there have been instances when stocks in a state of collapse have made remarkable recoveries when closed to commercial fisheries for even short periods. European fish stocks were very much at risk of total collapse prior to both “World wars”. On both occasions the fisheries were practically closed for the wartime period. We believe that the industry should be investigating ways to alleviate any hardships that a cessation of trawling in the Irish Sea would cause.

Incentivising vessels to participate in selective fisheries. The growing offshore energy industry could possibly offer lucrative opportunities for vessels and crews. This industry will close large areas of the Irish Sea to fishing for extended periods during the construction phase anyway, and impact on fisheries in the long term. We recognise that there could be problems with a certain amount of displacement of fishing effort to other sea areas by trawlers who do not wish to adapt to selective methods.

We believe that it is in everyone's long-term interest to close the Irish Sea to trawlers even for a term long enough to allow a single year class of demersal fish to mature and spawn. By restoring the stocks in what is a relatively small sea area to a healthy mixed stock which can then be managed in a sustainable manner will require sacrifices in the short term but ensure a future for the Irish Sea fishing fleet. Without the co-operation of all interests around the Irish Sea basin especially the fishermen this proposal cannot happen.

We would like to see the industry itself forward this proposal to safeguard the interests of future fishermen. Again we ask that the industry consider closing the inshore spawning and nursery areas to non-selective methods to protect future stocks.