The Crisis in North Sea Fisheries-
Last Exit: Bergen 2002

The protection of the North Sea marine environment, which is the responsibility of the Environment Ministers, is hampered by the negative impacts of fisheries on the North Sea ecosystem, its species and habitats. The main obstacle is the EU Common Fisheries Policy (CFP). Over the last 20 years, it has failed to protect both fish stocks and the marine environment. However, the CFP is currently under review and 2002 offers an important opportunity to resolve many of the problems associated with North Sea fisheries. Therefore, the Environment Ministers should take advantage of the reform process and in their Declaration from the North Sea Conference set clear objectives for an improved fisheries management framework that will restore fish stocks and protect the wider marine environment. Ministers should make the Bergen Declaration as concrete as possible, by setting clear goals and specifying timelines for the implementation and evaluation of the suggested measures.

WWF calls on Ministers to

• note that the current process of reforming the EU Common Fisheries Policy presents a major opportunity to integrate environmental issues into the principles, objectives and operational procedures of fisheries management.
• urge the competent authorities to make progress to this end and offer their full co-operation to facilitate this.
• urge the competent authorities to minimise bycatch of non-target species by implementing concrete measures, such as improvement of gear selectivity and area restrictions.
• agree to adopt and implement as soon as possible and in cooperation with all competent authorities a recovery plan for harbour porpoise in the North Sea, with a reduction of the bycatch levels to less than 1% of the best available population estimate as an intermediate precautionary objective in line with the ASCOBANS resolutions. (= Agreement on the Conservation of Small Cetaceans of the Baltic and North Seas)

Background

At the 4th North Sea Conference 1995 in Esbjerg, North Sea Environment Ministers acknowledged the significant impact of fisheries on North Sea ecosystems and agreed that there was an urgent need to discuss the integration of environmental and fisheries policies with the Fisheries Ministers at an Intermediate Ministerial Meeting (IMM) in Bergen 1997. Despite the commitments made at this inter-ministerial meeting, very few real improvements have been seen.

The majority of fish stocks in the North Sea are heavily overfished. Many popular species, such as cod, haddock and plaice are “outside safe biological limits” with an increasing risk of collapse. The North Sea cod stock is at a historical low and of the over 270,000 tonnes of mature individuals recorded in 1980s, only 20% (or 55,000 tonnes) is recorded today. To secure the stock in the long-term, a minimum of 150,000 tonnes of mature fish is needed. To date, the recovery plans agreed at the IMM 1997 have not been implemented. Overcapacity was recognised as one of the major drivers behind the impacts of fishing and has not yet been resolved.

The level of fishing effort and current fishing practices also cause considerable direct damage to species and habitats, threatening the biodiversity of the ecosystem. It is estimated that more than 500,000 tonnes of marine animals are caught accidentally in unselective fishing gears every year. Those thrown back to sea (discarded) rarely survive. Many of the species discarded are young.
fish of commercial species such as cod, but bycatch also includes species such as sharks, rays, benthic animals, seabirds and marine mammals. As a consequence, the populations of many of these species are now threatened. For example, more than 7,000 harbour porpoise in the central and southern North Sea are killed annually in bottom-set gill net fisheries for cod, plaice and turbot. The numbers are far higher than the harbour porpoise population can sustain.

The extensive use of fishing gear trawling the sea bottom also has an impact on large areas of the North Sea. Heavy beam and otter trawls destroy many species and habitats, such as burrowing and reef forming animals. Large areas especially in the southern North Sea are literally ploughed by heavy fishing gears, sometimes 4 to 10 times a year. As a result, sensitive, fragile and slowly developing species are declining while more robust and faster developing species are favoured. There is therefore a shift in species composition and structure of benthic habitats in the North Sea, the long-term effects of which are unknown.

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Further Reading:


WWF (1997): There is no point in camouflaging the crisis in North Sea fisheries. WWF’s essentials for the Intermediate Ministerial Meeting on Integration of Fisheries and Environmental Issues (IMM, Bergen, Norway). WWF North-East Atlantic Programme, Bremen.


Stop over-fishing...

...or fishing will be over!