

North Sea Cod are saved from Extinction

Fr. Seán McDonagh SSC. (May 18th 2010).

Environmental good news stories are rare, especially in the area of protecting biodiversity. We are told by competent scientists that extinction is rampant among plants, animals, bird and fish species. It is estimated that one third of the bird species of the world are now on the Red List of endangered species. This is why the report in May 2010 from the World Wild Fund for Nature (WWF) that North Sea cod which were on the brink of extinction due to overfishing a few short decades ago, are no longer endangered. The WWF document claims that stocks of cod have risen by 52 per cent from their historic low in 2006, and can now be fished once again. For people of my generation and our parents, fish (usually cod) and chips wrapped in newspaper have had a very special place in our diet.

The marine scientists who wrote the report are delighted that a combination of quota cuts and other conservation measure have led to this recovery. However, they point out that the current cod stocks are only a fraction of the number which existed before highly mechanised methods of fishing were introduced after World War II. In 1889, the British fishing fleet, with much less sophisticated fishing gear and navigation tools, were landing twice as much fish as the fleet does today. In the cod fishing alone, there has been an 83 per cent drop in catches during the past one hundred years.

Much of the damage to the cods stocks happened in the 1970s and 1980s. In the 1960s, cod was cheap and plentiful. In 1970, for example, 250,000 tonnes of cod was taken from the sea. This stripping of the sea of cod continued relentlessly throughout the 1980s and 1990s, until in 2006, the catch was reduced to 35,700 tonnes. Bertie Armstrong, the chief executive of the Scottish Fishermen's Federation accepts that "fishermen were all mesmerised by the quantities (of fish) available and regrettably what happened is that nations and individual businesses increase the size of their fleet." ¹ As a result of this plundering activity, the stocks collapsed. This year in 2010, it is expected that the biomass of the cod stock could be in the order of 54,250 tonnes. According to the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea, (ICES) the body which advises the European Union's fishery policy, a full recovery of the cod stocks would mean a biomass of between 70,000 and 150,000 tonnes each year. As a result of the improvement in the stocks, the British quota for North Sea cod has increased this year from 11,210 to 13,000 tonnes. If the recovery continues, North Sea cod may soon be available in U.K. supermarkets. The cod that one buys today has come from Iceland.

The recovery of cod stocks in the North Sea is also a victory for the European Union's Fisheries policies. In recent years, the EU successfully cut cod quotas. Other initiatives by fishermen themselves have also contributed. Twenty two out of the one hundred white fish boats in Scotland have agreed to install monitoring cameras on their ships. Such measures prevent fishermen from throwing smaller valuable fish from other species over board. These fish are often called bycatch or discards and have been routinely dumped overboard. Otherwise, if they were included in the catch, the fishermen would have to reduce their cod catch to stay within the quota. Fishermen have also begun using a larger mesh in their nets, and fitted panels which are designed to allow juvenile fish to escape. Furthermore, there are a lot fewer boats fishing the cod than obtained twenty, thirty or forty years ago. Callum Roberts, a marine biologist from the University of York said that, "Signs of improvement of North Sea cod stocks are encouraging. The sort of measures that are being undertaken in Scotland are good developments."² While there is general rejoicing among the conservation community and among fishermen about the replenishing of cod stocks Callum Roberts adds a word of caution. "Although the trend is in the right direction, it's definitely too early to celebrate."³ Still, the enlightened policies at EU and national levels and the enhanced cooperation between the various stakeholders which has stemmed the tide of extinction of cod in the North Sea can be replicated in other areas around the world.