

CHAPTER 13

THE PARTICIPATORY ROLE OF THE MEDIA IN FISHERIES GOVERNANCE

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Abstract

This chapter considers the role of the British media in European and UK national fisheries governance politics. It is divided into three parts. First, I shall argue that the national print and television media has influenced, and continues to influence, fisheries policy, but that this is largely in the direction of environmentalism and marine conservation, at the expense of fishing. Second, I shall argue that, by contrast, regional newspapers sometimes influence fisheries policy in favour of fishermen. Third, I shall argue that the direct influence exerted by the specialist fishing trade press over fisheries policy is negligible, but that it plays an important role in speaking up for the fishing industry and fisheries-dependent communities.

13.1 Introduction

One of the most notable features of European Union (EU) fisheries policy in recent years has been a marked shift away from concern primarily with the interests and well-being of fishermen, and towards an overwhelming concern with conservation and marine eco-system preservation. This shift in priorities has been driven by the environmental movement, helped by a friendly media. It reflects the growth in political power of the environmental movement and a corresponding decline in the political influence of the fishing industry.

One of the most significant results of this shift has been a gradual change in the public perception of fishermen. Until recent times, the public, in general, regarded fishermen with a mixture of respect and admiration. They were almost heroic figures, who braved the elements and did a physically arduous and dangerous job under difficult conditions to put high protein food on people's tables. A visit to the harbour to see fishing vessels landing their catches, and to take in the general atmosphere of fishing, was a central feature of seaside holidays. But in a relatively short time, this perception has changed dramatically. Many people, and especially young people, now see fishermen as greedy, self interested pirates who plunder the oceans with powerful and technically sophisticated vessels and equipment, without a thought for the marine environment or for future generations of fishermen. This perception is particularly prevalent in urban regions where people have little knowledge of the sea and do not identify with rural or coastal communities and ways of life.

This change has occurred largely because of the environmental movement's relentless portrayal of the world's oceans as barren deserts due to over-fishing. This message has

been relayed via a print and TV media that is hugely receptive to such a portrayal. This has, in turn, led to public support for the environmental cause, and persuaded politicians to take its side in pushing for curbs on fishing to protect fish stocks and the marine environment. There are many votes in being seen to be 'green', but few votes for backing the fishing industry. Even in Scotland, fishing represents only about 2.5 per cent of the total economy, and in the UK as a whole it is only 0.03 per cent of GDP. The number of fishermen in the UK is only 12,000, with another 22,000 employed in the fish processing industry (PMSU 2004:27). This compares with a figure of well over 2 million members of environmental NGOs (Rawcliffe 1998:74).

In the next section (section 2) of this chapter, I show how the national media has presented this environmentalist agenda, at the expense of fishing interests. In section 3, I explain how the picture is rather different at the regional level, where news media are more sympathetic to the fishermen's cause, and sometimes succeed in their campaigns for policy shifts in their direction. In section 4, I focus on the specialist fishing trade press, which, while having little effect on fisheries policies, nevertheless serves a valuable function as the voice of the beleaguered industry facing bankruptcy, and the champion of fisheries-dependent communities facing decline.

13.2 National media

The national print and television media, in relaying the concerns of the public and the environmental movement over the marine environment, has significantly influenced fisheries governance. Journalism is nowadays very much the province of young people, who tend, rightly, to be idealistic and to want to change the world. Many young journalists are environmentally inclined, and thus are susceptible to accept sympathetically, although often uncritically, the stance of the environmental movement in general, not just the marine environmentalists. They tend to be 'eco-left' politically, and their instincts lean towards the environmental cause and against the commercial fishing industry.

An example from my own experience graphically illustrates this tendency. Some time ago, when the current 'cod crisis' was beginning to build up, I received a call from a journalist putting together an item on fishing and fish stocks for a TV news slot. She asked me if I would comment on the 'fish stocks crisis'. I pointed out to her that not all stocks were in crisis and that some were very healthy such as pelagic stocks (herring and mackerel), prawns and haddock, among others. I also pointed out that not all cod stocks were in trouble and that cod was in good shape in waters around Iceland, Norway and the Faeroes. She then became very hesitant and said that that was 'not really the line I was looking for', and that she would call me back. Needless to say, she did not.

It has become noticeable in recent years that articles in the national broadsheets on marine environmental issues have failed to include even a perspective from the fishing industry. Articles often appear following press releases from environmental organisations such as the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), English Nature, the Institute for European Environmental Policy (IEEP), Greenpeace, the Marine Conservation Society (MCS) and the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) and several