

Impact of the EEC on fisheries: a contextual overview of the case study

Despite extensive fish stocks in the waters around its coasts, the Irish fishing industry was underdeveloped when Ireland became a member of the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1973. It had the smallest fleet in the EEC and under 2% of the total catch in the year it joined (Barrington, Cooney: 1984). In 1952, Bord Iascaigh Mhara (BIM) had been founded under the Sea Fisheries Act, to promote the development of fishing at sea, but the economic climate was not conducive and development was slow: at the beginning of the 1960s there were fewer than 800 full-time fishermen in the west of Ireland (Ferriter, 2004).

As economic conditions improved, the decade before entry to the EEC saw growth in the fishing industry. The number of fishermen grew by about 50%, the landings tripled, the fleet grew and investment in fish processing increased. (Barrington, Cooney, 1984). The growing importance of the fishing industry was brought home to the Irish public in 1971 when the biennial World Fisheries Exhibition was held in Ireland for the first time. (de Courcy Ireland, 1981).

As accession to the EEC loomed, however, there was increasing concern about the likely impact of membership on the industry. During the 1971 exhibition, fishermen from Ireland, England, Wales and the Isle of Man met to coordinate opposition to the fishery policy of the EEC, a subject that was arousing controversy. The problem was a clause in the Treaty of Rome that permitted fishing craft from EEC member states to fish up to each other's coasts. The fear was that this could lead to large numbers of German, Dutch and French vessels flocking into our coastal waters. In the negotiations that led to accession, a compromise was reached. A twelve-mile limit was to apply on the north and west coasts from Lough Foyle to Cork for all species of fish and on the east coast from Carlingford Lough to Carnsore Point for shellfish.

Other challenges soon arose. In October 1975, Iceland declared a 200-mile protected zone around its coast. During 1976 it became clear that the United States, the Soviet Union, Canada and Norway would follow this example. Thus in November 1976 the member states of the Community agreed to extend to 200 miles their fisheries zones in the North Sea and the North Atlantic from January 1977. Increasing restrictions on access to international waters caused the EEC to focus attention on the growing problem of diminishing fish stocks in EEC waters due to overfishing. Negotiations on quotas and TACs (total allowable catches) continued for many years until a Common Fisheries Policy was eventually agreed in 1983.

Meanwhile, despite unsuccessful demands from the Irish and British governments for a 50-mile protected zone, some concessions to assist Irish sea fisheries were secured. In The Hague, in October 1976, Minister for Foreign Affairs Garret FitzGerald won recognition of the Irish fishing industry's right to expand by doubling the catch between 1977 and 1979. To achieve this, the fleet would be increased by some 300 vessels. Processing and other shore-based services would be expanded. In January 1978, Brian Lenihan dropped demands for a 50-mile limit and accepted that Ireland's interests could best be served by a series of interim plans until such time as a common fisheries policy was adopted. Between 1977 and 1982, Ireland secured about IR£15 million in grants for the fishing industry and IR£30 million for surveillance on sea and in the air.

All the while the Killybegs Fishermen's Association and, subsequently, the Irish Fishermen's Organisation, under the leadership of Joey Murrin, kept up a vociferous campaign to pressurise the government to get the best deal for fishermen – and for the country. Murrin remained an outspoken critic of EEC fisheries policy for many years. However, once a Common Fisheries Policy was agreed in 1983, a degree of calm descended on a situation which had seen tempers fray and conflicting interests collide for more than a decade.