

EUROPE'S COMMON FISHERIES POLICY: Changing Perspectives on Fisheries Management

David Symes
University of Hull, UK
dg@dgsymes.karoo.co.uk

There is no doubting the relevance to European fisheries of Fikret Berkes' elegant and insightful critique of modern resource management and his framing of an alternative resilience approach (Berkes 2010). His critique exposes the very roots of failure of fisheries management in Europe and especially the European Community's Common Fisheries Policy which lays down the basis of management for all but a handful of European coastal states. That policy is widely acknowledged as a deeply flawed, if not failed, system of management. It is castigated for its failings by independent commentators, member states and by the Commission of the European Communities itself (CEC 2009).

Shifting Perspectives ... serves rather less well as a template for rescuing fisheries management in Europe from the accumulated impacts of 150 years of misguided fishing practice, or as a route map for reforming the CFP in ways that might allow resilience thinking to exert more influence over the policy approach. Berkes' analysis pays little attention to the institutional structures of governance that shape the management system. EC fisheries policy is currently locked into a system of centralised decision making that attempts to micromanage one of the largest and most complex exclusive fishing zones, marginalises stakeholder participation and insists on dividing fisheries and marine environmental management between two directorates. Fisheries are clearly a victim of 'big government'.

Accounting for the Failings of Conventional Management

All five characteristics identified by Berkes as contributing to conventional natural resource management – including commodification of nature, the rise of a managerial élite and the adoption of a positivist and reductionist science – are readily identifiable in the relatively short history of modern fisheries management in Europe. Evidence of the failure of such management is not hard to find: depletion of commercial fish stocks, high levels of discards of target and non-target species, the disruption of food webs are all unintended outcomes of an approach that chooses to ignore the need for management to work within the changing parameters of ecosystems in order to maintain their essential diversity, productivity and integrity.

Beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, the industrialisation of Europe's fishing industries – based on the separation of capital and labour, economies of scale, specialisation and an approach to marketing that focused on quantity rather than quality of landings – eventually broke the connection between the fishing

community and local, nearshore fishing grounds. Increasing operational range for the steam trawler ended the traditional dependence on the functioning of the local ecosystem. Across most of Europe fishing remained a small scale, family based, rural enterprise. Distant water fishing, however, became a largely urban occupation and social resilience was based on class rather than community. Modern fisheries management was initially designed to prevent overfishing mainly associated with the large scale industrial sector through restrictive licensing and the imposition of TACS and quotas. It failed, however, to forestall the 'advances' in vessel design and harvesting technology that helped fuel the race to fish.

The modern industry – and especially the offshore sector – craved certainty and stability as a basis for forward planning, investment and debt repayment. Policy makers were willing to oblige through guarantees of 'relative stability', linear long term management plans and encouragement for market led rights based management. None of these has so far succeeded in reducing the levels of risk and uncertainty associated with fishing. The resilience of local social systems has been weakened by the successive capture of local management functions by the state. Moreover, the stranglehold of bureaucratic regulation deprived the individual fishing enterprise of the flexibility of operation that would allow it to adapt to seasonal variations, annual fluctuations and long term trends affecting the marine ecosystem. It also undermined the fishers' social identity, status and esteem, traditionally earned through their skill in exploiting local ecological knowledge and experience.

In one particular respect, Berkes' analysis of the changing perspectives on natural resource management seems unduly optimistic. While there are strong currents of change evident in critical social and ecological science literature, these have not yet entered the mainstream of policy related research and are certainly not embedded in the consciousness of professional managers. The ecosystem based approach to fisheries management is a case in point. Although established as a principle of the CFP in 2002, its implementation has been hesitant and continues to rely on a few basic technical measures to minimise the impacts of fishing on endangered habitats and species. Closer integration of fisheries and marine environmental management is likely to remain unhurried while there is institutional segregation between the two policy areas. More controversial rethinking of resource management will have an even harder time gaining recognition.

Resolving the Crisis in Fisheries Management

It is far from easy to distil the lessons of resilience thinking for reforming the huge, multi-layered system of decision making that is the CFP. For EC fisheries management in general the principal objective must be to deconstruct the present institutional framework and unpack the layers of inappropriate regulation generated by centralised decision making. Only when this is done can fisheries management be sufficiently exposed to new thinking on resource management.

The literature on resilience thinking is strongly skewed towards experience in developing countries. Berkes' own analysis remains rooted in artisanal

fisheries where locally integrated social and ecological systems, though damaged as a result of the incursion of modern management, still survive. His approach therefore has relevance for the extensive polyvalent small scale fisheries of southern Europe and more broadly for the management of Europe's inshore waters where responsibility is largely devolved to the member state. It is in this context that we might reasonably envisage a system that recognises the importance of flexible and locally controlled management and that seeks to live with uncertainty rather than attempt to override it. It is much more difficult to see how resilience thinking can impact directly on the management of the more specialised industrial and semi-industrial offshore fisheries which pose the greater risk to the ecosystems of northern European waters.

Here the management dilemma is embodied in the highly complex physical and political geographies of Europe's coastline and the fact that the principal fisheries of the semi-enclosed Irish, North and Baltic seas are shared by two, eight and nine coastal states respectively. For EC policy, therefore, the crucial scale for both fisheries and environmental management is the regional rather than the local marine ecosystem. The 'systems' that must be integrated are those of the macro regional ecosystem and the multinational, political assembly of member states that share both the exploitation of the region's resources and responsibility for ensuring its 'good environmental status'. Even if there were no CFP, management of Europe's offshore fisheries would need to rely on multilateral and bilateral agreements between neighbouring coastal states, set in a regional framework.

Previous attempts to reform the CFP have been content to follow a path dependent course framed by the European Treaties, the basic principle of non-discrimination (equal access) and the so-called safeguard of 'relative stability' (Gazelius and Raakjaer 2008). By contrast, a key focus of the 2012 reform agenda appears to be a fundamental restructuring of decision making responsibilities. This would have the effect of devolving authority for detailed technical regulation to member states and their fishing industries and so bring to an end the vexed issue of centralised micromanagement.

Under proposals for regionalising the CFP, the Commission retains responsibility for the strategic approach to management throughout the EC's fishing zone with the Council of Ministers and European Parliament jointly responsible for signing off the strategy as Community policy. Member states working together within a regional framework would then translate Community policy into agreed regional management plans to be implemented through member state legislations.

Additionally, the Commission's Green Paper envisages a much stronger involvement of the fishing industry through a 'results based management' approach in which the industry must demonstrate its ability to operate responsibly in return for access to the fishery. In practice, groups of fishers would draw up annual or multi-annual operational plans indicating precisely how they would satisfy the principles, objectives and targets of fisheries policy set at Community and/or regional levels. In most instances, this should allow the replacement of a set of rigid and sometimes incoherent centrally imposed regulations by a more flexible, adaptive form of management on a regional scale.

All this is a far cry from the kind of radical rethinking of natural resource management that Berkes' paper so persuasively outlines, though can be seen as a response to the concept of interactive governance (Kooiman *et al.* 2005). Indeed almost all other areas of reform outlined in the Green Paper show a continuing attachment to a conventional management approach. Only the controversial suggestion of a differentiated management regime for small scale coastal fleets 'designed to secure the ecological sustainability of the stocks on which the coastal communities depend' and where decision making should be made as close as possible to the community, seems to offer an entry point for a resilience oriented approach. Should the Commission, Council and Parliament prove bold enough to carry through the agenda for institutional reform, however, it could well represent the essential first step towards a more far reaching reconceptualisation of fisheries management in Europe.

References

- Berkes, F.
2010 Shifting Perspectives on Resource Management: Resilience and Redefinition of 'Natural Resources' and 'Management'. *MAST* 9(1): forthcoming.
- Commission of the European Communities
2009 *Green Paper: Reform of the Common Fisheries Policy*. COM (2009) 163 final. CEC, Brussels.
- Gazelius, S. S. and Raakjaer, J. (Eds.)
2008 *Making Fisheries Management Work: Implementation of Policies for Sustainable Fishing*. Dordrecht: Springer
- Kooiman, J., Bavinck, M., Jentoft, S. and Pulin, R. (Eds.)
2005 *Fish for Life: Interactive Governance for Fisheries*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.