ASSOCIATION OF NATIONAL ORGANISATIONS
OF FISHING ENTERPRISES IN THE EU

EP(15)78 1st September 2015

Europêche position against regulating deep sea fishing by depth

A recent report *'A Scientific Basis for Regulating Deep-Sea Fishing by Depth*[1]*'* finds that there is a depth beyond which fisheries cannot be expected to operate in an economically and ecologically sustainable way. Europêche believe this report to be misleading, omits vital information on the realities of deep sea fishing operations and is statically and methodologically flawed.

The report claims that regulating deep sea fishing by depth can be justified based upon the analysis of scientific trawl survey data. Using survey data to draw conclusions on commercial activity is always fraught with danger. Survey data is normally collected on a random (varying degrees) trawl location whereas commercial tows are quite specific and aimed at specific species or groups of species. The survey nets are not the same as commercial nets and have a smaller mesh cod-end. In many cases, the survey trawls are aimed at daylight fishing and therefore may not reflect the pattern of commercial activity. It is often said that conclusions on the reality of abundance cannot be drawn from commercial tows if not justified by sophisticated statistical analysis; It is hard to understand how the reverse can be possible.

Regarding the aforementioned point, the authors state that *"Three of the four trawl nets (OTSB, BT184_16, and BT184_21) used in this analysis were scientific nets, with a smaller mesh size and smaller width than commercial nets, raising the issue of how representative these results are of commercial fishing operations. However, the fourth net used was a commercial fishing gear, and the catch ratios derived from the scientific nets were similar, suggesting that this issue is not of major concern."* On the contrary, Europêche believe it is still a major issue. We notice that the data related to this fourth net (BT195), beyond the fact that they were collected randomly (see before), does not show the same trends as the other data, does not include data concerning elasmobranches (sharks and rays) and more often than not concerns depths smaller than the other survey data (under 600/700 meters). It seems that no statistical test was done to ensure that the data coming from the fourth net can be compared with the data from the first three nets.

As a point of comparison, in the framework of the EU data collection, data on catches at depths further than 600 meters, collected by observers on board commercial boats, show quite different values for the metrics used by the authors.

The report is based on four indices, the second of which looks at the ratio of discarded to commercial biomass. The discards of non-commercial species in commercial trawls cannot be compared with estimates of abundance within research vessels for a combination of reasons such as those mentioned above. Discarding rates for main commercial species are often determined by quota availability and this will vary from vessel to vessel and country to country. One key point to bear in mind for the future is that the implementation of the landing obligation will force vessels into even more selective and targeting methods for catching quota species rendering the findings on discards no longer relevant.

[1] Clarke et al., A Scientific Basis for Regulating Deep-Sea Fishing by Depth, Current Biology (2015), http://dx.doi.org/ 10.1016/j.cub.2015.07.070

The third of the indices used looked at the ratio of elasmobranches to commercial biomass. Targeted fishing for most shark species has been prohibited by NEAFC since 2013 and although having a zero TAC does not prevent elasmobranches getting caught as by catch, it certainly means that vessels will not be targeting them and will therefore be avoiding areas where they would have targeted efforts on these species. From those shark species that are discarded (mainly juveniles and noncommercial small target species from longliners), most are in fact landed at port and so the quantities are relatively small.[2]

The survey is also based on old literature starting from almost 40 years ago, which will certainly not paint a realistic or up to date picture of current deep sea operations. The report goes on to infer that there are high levels of shark species caught yet "*very few Elasmobranchii were caught in the Porcupine Seabight trawls, so these were excluded from the analysis*". This selective use of the facts distorts the findings. Given that these species cannot be landed commercially, fishermen will actively avoid them.

The report openly dismisses "*a recent study in the North East Atlantic suggested that there has been no detectable impact on deep-sea fishing on fish diversity*", even though this recent study was co-signed by one of the authors of the report. The authors clarify this stating that it takes time for the effects of fishing to become fully apparent. In this vein, it could take time for the positive effects of management plans to become apparent.

Europêche support the need for the protection of Vulnerable Marine Ecosystems (VMEs), but banning fishing from areas that have been fished for many years risks displacing activity onto more pristine, less-fished habitats. Alternative fishing methods are not possible for many EU vessels and in many cases the target species, such as anglerfish, cannot be caught in commercial quantities by methods such as long lining. A prohibition on trawling and bottom-set gillnetting below a certain depth is a blunt tool since it works on an assumption that all areas below a certain depth have important conservation features. Conversely the **footprint approach**, whereby vessels are restricted to fishing in areas that are already fished, enables a more straight forward approach to both management and, more importantly, monitoring and enforcement.

Many species cannot be caught by other fishing methods other than trawling, so the proposal would forgo making use of what is inherently a renewable food source, and one of the most sustainable forms of food production on the planet. For example, Greenland halibut is fished at 900m in EU waters and at 1400m in NAFO waters.

Europêche fully supports a compromise drafted by the European Parliament that would eliminate the unworkable and counterproductive depth ban and incorporate the footprint approach regarding the zonation of permissible operations; a measure for the protection of VMEs. The general objective of the proposal therefore must be to ensure the sustainable exploitation of deep-sea stocks while reducing the environmental impact of these fisheries.

[2] Preliminary estimates of French deepwater fishery discards in the Northeast Atlantic Ocean, V. Allain a, A. Biseaub and B. Kergoatb, 2003