REBUILD BRITAIN’S FISHING INDUSTRY

Develop our coastal communities for a sustainable future in an independent Britain

Brian Denny
A major reason for leaving the European Union was to regain sovereignty and control of Britain's historic fishing waters. Restoring full control over the 200-mile limit for fishing would provide a basis to rebuild Britain's fishing industry and expand and sustain strong fish stocks for the long term.

Britain's fishing fleets should have absolute priority to fish in the restored national waters. Non-British fleets should be excluded, subject to limited licensing of foreign boats to fish in British waters, carefully and rigorously regulated and policed and only where there will be no negative impact on the British fishing industry and fish stocks.

It is only when each country has full sovereignty and control over their own fishing waters will responsible fishing practices be restored, as we have seen in Norway, Iceland and Greenland, and the irresponsible plundering of each others' fishing grounds can be prevented. Mutually agreed, limited, licensed and strongly regulated fishing in each others' waters might become possible but such a new regime for fishing around all of Europe's shores is vital for its long term sustainable future.

This may sound very ambitious, but it should be said. Fish tend to swim about, at least some of them do, so that overfishing in one area has some impact on fish stocks elsewhere. There must therefore be some leverage on all of the EU's maritime fishing nations to seek a rational agreed future for all.

Brian Denny's excellent pamphlet is a wake-up call to rebuild Britain's fishing industry and for the long-term conservation of fish stocks in our seas.

-Kelvin Hopkins
Former MP for Luton North
Introduction

There is no doubt that fishing communities have felt the full brunt of European Union membership under the Common Fisheries Policy just like other industries and areas have suffered from EU directives and the general de-industrialisation of this country.

As a result, hundreds of thousands of tonnes of fish are removed from UK waters every year by EU fleets that are allowed to fish up to the six-mile limit.

Yet the Brexit trade deal agreed at the end of 2020 was a further blow to the industry as EU boats will continue to fish in UK waters for some years to come. Added to this the deal between the EU and the UK government has effectively put a blockade on fish exports on Britain with new customs arrangements and banned the import of live shellfish that are often landed from the same fishing grounds as French fishing boats.

The £23 million compensation scheme announced by the government in January 2021 to support fish exporters has been described as a “sticking plaster”. The government has also promised to invest £100 million to modernise the fishing industry but this is not new money and the vast majority of it comes from existing Covid and Brexit funds.

The average age of Britain’s fishers is 57 yet there is currently very little provision to encourage young people into the industry. The government should be investing in training centres which would allow experienced fishing experts to impart their precious knowledge to a new generation before it is too late.

UK fishing boats have been promised a greater share of fish from UK waters in the future and, in theory, Britain will have the right to completely exclude EU boats after 2026. However, EU fleets will continue to fish within the 12-mile limit of British waters. This clearly needs to be resisted in every way possible.

There is an opportunity over the next five years to rebuild Britain’s fishing sector and related industries with a cohesive, sustainable joined up strategy that takes into account the fishing industry as well as environmental and social responsibilities that go with it including the re-generation of our coastal communities. The fishing industry is worth around a billion pounds to this country and could create thousands of highly skilled, well-paid jobs in the coastal communities that desperately need them.

It is time to demand that politicians reassert themselves as part of the democratic process and plan in the interests of human beings and sustainability. Now is the time to fight to rebuild Britain’s fishing industries.
Today it is almost universally acknowledged that the EU’s Common Fisheries Policy (CFP) has been an unmitigated ecological, economic and social disaster which has actively led to over-fishing, the dumping of millions of tonnes of dead fish back into the sea, bankruptcies and enforced criminality as well as turning fishing communities against each other.

In order to understand how this country’s coastal and fishing communities have come to be in such a perilous state it is necessary to understand what has been inflicted on them over the last half century.

Just over 50 years ago Britain controlled some of the richest fishing grounds in the world which contained four-fifths of all European fish stocks. They are situated where the warm waters of the Gulf Stream meet the cold waters of the Arctic, bringing to the surface the mineral salts that plankton feed on. These tiny organisms start the marine food chain. Britain is also rich in shallows where all species breed from Shetlands to Cornwall as well as submerged land masses in the North Sea such as Dogger Bank.

Yet in 1970 Tory prime minister Edward Heath colluded to secretly give away one of this country’s greatest renewable asset without even the knowledge of the British public, setting in motion the destruction of Britain’s fishing industry and a social and environmental disaster.

The original Treaty of Rome establishing the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1957 by the original six members France, West Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Belgium, and Luxembourg made no mention of fisheries.

However, in 1970 they realised that the four countries applying to join the Common Market at that time, Britain, Ireland, Denmark including Greenland, and Norway, would control the richest fishing grounds in the world. The original six therefore drew up Council Regulation 2141/70 giving all members ‘equal access’ to all fishing waters. Fishing grounds were to be a ‘common resource’ – the only one.

Despite the profound implications that this would have for the fishing industry this regulation was adopted on June 30 1970, a few hours before the applications to join were officially received. This ensured that these regulations became part of the acquis communautaire (ie EU law) before the new members had even joined, obliging them to accept the regulation completely un-amended. Under these rules fishing vessels owned by land-locked Austria would have the same rights in British waters.

This is how the CFP came about, in secret and without any democratic oversight or legal status. In fact, the CFP had to be quietly inserted into the Maastricht treaty over 20 years later to give it back-dated legality.

Edward Heath’s Tories were desperate to sign up so it dropped any opposition to the CFP in favour of a ten-year derogation ending on December 31, 1982. As a result, the Accession Treaty was signed on January 22 1972, bringing nearly all the fish off Western Europe under the control of Brussels at a stroke.

Heath even persuaded Norway’s prime minister Trygve Brattel into agreeing a similar betrayal but Norway’s fisheries minister resigned in protest, exposing the trap and forcing a referendum which allowed the people to vote against EEC membership. Greenland also withdrew from the Economic Community in 1985, after having gained partial independence from Denmark in 1979, as it was clear that the CFP had robbed them of its fishing grounds.
The fishing community in Britain was divided. While inshore producers expressed their opposition the most profitable part of the fishing industry, the ‘distant water fleet’ organised in a few rich companies, were bought off.

These were huge trawlers sailing out of Fleetwood, Hull and Grimsby to the rich fishing grounds around Iceland and beyond and UK governments supported them by promoting a principle of “open seas” – basically fishing where you wanted.

But Iceland had begun to assert control over its waters in a series of confrontations between trawlers and gunboats known as the “cod wars”. The final “cod war” came in the mid-seventies when Iceland imposed a 200-mile exclusive zone. However, Edward Heath had given away Britain’s power to do the same as all member states had equal access and was banned from preventing fishing in its waters.

This problem was exacerbated in 1986 with the accession of Spain with the one of the largest fishing fleets in the world but with few fishing grounds of its own. Through the multi-annual guidance programme which divided up quotas continually for the ever-growing number of member states, the European Commission made room for Spain on the basis of political expediency and the secretive horse-trading that is a way of life in the corridors of Brussels.

As a result, by 1996 Britain’s fleet had to be reduced by nearly 20 per cent while Spain’s much bigger fleet reduction was just four per cent. Spain got around this by simply re-flagging this amount as British, thereby becoming eligible to more European funding to build newer vessels.

Unbelievably this decommissioning process led to British boat owners destroying their own vessels under the watchful eye of government officials on the beaches while foreign fishing companies bought up their quota. In a heart-breaking example of the impact of decommissioning, the Thomas family on Canvey Island in Essex were forced to drive a mechanical digger through their boats which they had designed and built themselves over many years. Many of these UK vessels had quota attached to them, which the owners were allowed to keep as part of a retirement plan. However, these quotas were leased or sold and this was enabled through UK government policy and the privatisation of the UK share of the EU total allowable catch (TAC), i.e. the UK fishing opportunities (quotas) through the Fixed Quota Allocation (FQA) system.
An environmental disaster

CFP rules have forced fishers to dump billions of dead fish overboard because they are too small or the wrong species or in the case of the UK inshore fleet, fish they did not have the rights to land but was unavoidable to catch in mixed inshore fisheries. A UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) study recently estimated that discards in the North Atlantic amount to 13 per cent of the catch, with even higher rates off the coasts of Scotland and Ireland.

In 2011, over one million people signed a petition from celebrity chef Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall aimed at stopping the wasteful discarding of dead fish. Standing in front of the Houses of Parliament, with two large cod in his hands, the chef slammed the ‘unacceptable and shameful practice’ of throwing overboard huge amounts of perfectly edible fish.

In 2013 a discard ban was announced following a huge popular outcry. However, predictably, the ensuing EU fudge left the door wide open to legislation filled with loopholes which are exploited in a cynical way by ministries around the EU as well as the UK. Coupled with a lack of enforcement capabilities at sea, the effect has only added to overexploitation of fish stocks that were already in trouble.

In December 2020, EU ministers established yearly “total allowable catches” (TACs) and quotas but the deal struck in Brussels failed to meet any targets recommended by scientists.

Rebecca Hubbard, programme director at NGO Our Fish, said: “The agreement reached in December demonstrates that fisheries ministers cannot be entrusted with restoring healthy ocean ecosystems”.

Fisherman Martin Yorwarth agreed and said that there was a real problem with larger quota owners in the sector as wherever they operated it destroyed fishing communities.

“Here in Britain, we are now tied up because there are no fish due to the large fly shooters that cover much more area of sea than a typical inshore trawler and the same vessels employed pulse beamers in the North Sea which
are now banned after a 10-year campaign,” he said.

Even more criminal is the unbridled super exploitation by EU fishing fleets off Africa’s western coast. Overfishing in these fragile marine areas have reached catastrophic levels with many major fish stocks in serious decline. Illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing is heavily implicated in this overfishing. Yet under current EU rules it is impossible to establish the scale and legality of catches originating in western African waters. These fish are often laundered through the Canary Islands into EU markets without any oversight.

The European Commission’s Directorate-General for Maritime Affairs and Fisheries confirmed to the Overseas Development Institute that, between 2012 and 2014, only 135 fish container consignments were blocked because of IUU concerns. This represents a tiny fraction of the fish entering the EU from abroad.

Ifesinachi Okafor-Yarwood, who researches why West Africans are driven to illegal fishing, has found that the EU and West African countries have concluded fishing agreements that have shifted overcapacity in the EU fleet to West Africa, simultaneously leading to the decline in marine resources.

Coalition for Fair Fisheries Arrangements coordinator Beatrice Gorez has said that EU fleets are also targeting overexploited stocks in Africa through private licensing, chartering, joint venture agreements, and high seas fishing. She maintains that the EU is allocating funds to pay for access agreements by subsidising fishing with public money thereby artificially lowering costs for EU vessels in the region. These agreements which link financial compensation to permitted fishing levels end up encouraging overfishing because of the monetary incentives.

Kofi Annan, former UN Secretary General and Chair of the Africa Progress Panel said: “This plunder destroys entire coastal communities when they lose the opportunities to catch, process and trade. Commercial trawlers that operate under flags of convenience, and unload in ports that do not record their catch, are engaging in organised theft disguised as commerce”.

In other words the policies that have been inflicted on Britain’s fishing communities are now being visited upon some of the poorest countries in the world.
What is wrong with the quota systems?

One of the great disappointments of the Brexit deal which allowed Britain to leave the EU on January 31 2021 was the raw deal that the fishing communities in our coastal areas once more have had to endure through the quota systems.

Under the deal EU fishing fleets have been granted full access to British waters up to 12 nautical miles during a transition period up to June 30 2026. The TAC quota system introduced under the Common Fisheries Policy and the shares for each member state will also remain for the same period leaving many fishers in the same parlous situation as most of the quota is owned by foreign interests and a few millionaires.

While it was imperative that the government gained a withdrawal agreement, it was clear that the government failed when it came to re-gaining control of our fishing grounds.

This country has always operated a two-tier system. Up to 98% of the national quota has been allocated to producer organisations (POs). A portion of the quota is held in a publicly administered quota “pool” for collective use of inshore vessels, another smaller pool is available for the over 10 metre vessels but outside the PO system.

The vessels that fish from this pool include nearly all of the small boats that fish inshore waters and a group of larger trawlers known as the “non-sector”. But, from the early days of the CFP, the larger – over-10 metre – trawlers had another option: if they joined a producer organisation (PO), they could take their share of quota out of the pool to be managed by the PO. These vessels are known as “the sector”.

This led directly to growth in unregulated trade in licences and further encouraged the influx of “quota hoppers” from Spain and the Netherlands which continues to this date with the importance of Anglo-Dutch and Anglo-Spanish membership in the main POs – for example the Welsh PO is entirely Spanish and the East Coast POs are majority Dutch owned. According to the Tory peer Baroness Trumpington, by mid-1996 there were around 150 quota hoppers on the UK register. Around 40 of those vessels had joined before CFP quotas took effect. The rest had bought their way in since by buying up UK quotas from de-commissioned UK vessels.

This process has seen fishing rights stripped from many small coastal communities, consolidated into a handful of very rich fishing monopolies and transformed into a tradable commodity.

An Unearthed investigation published in 2020 found that well over a quarter of the UK’s fishing quota – 29 per cent – was in the hands of just five families on the Sunday Times Rich List. The reach of this tiny elite dwarfs the holdings of the many quota hoppers, who in total hold 13 per cent of UK quota. Overall, more than two thirds of the UK’s fishing quota is now in the hands of just 25 companies. And despite politicians’ hopes that quota ownership would engender “responsibility for the future of the stocks”, more than half of those businesses have directors, shareholders or vessel partners convicted in 2011-2012 of black landings
in the biggest organised overfishing scam ever to reach the British courts. In Northern Ireland, more than half the country’s quota is hoarded onto a single trawler.

One of the groups that have been most ill-served by the UK’s management of fishing rights has been its small-scale, inshore fishers. Despite the fact that this group comprises more than three quarters of the UK’s fishing fleet and provides around half of the jobs in the catching sector it has access to only a tiny fraction of the quota: less than two per cent, according to the New Economics Foundation. For many years in the early days of the CFP, UK fisheries managers kept little record of the amount of fish landed by the “under tens” – these boats were not allowed to create and hold track record, or, originally, to join producer organisations. Then, as now, they fished from the national “pool” of quota.

But the pool was never filled with enough quota to meet the needs of the inshore fleet. In response, the government in the mid-nineties “underpinned” some quotas for the under 10s, guaranteeing them a certain minimum tonnage, or percentage of the quota. But these underpinnings were not sufficient. When regulators began to keep closer track of the under 10s’ catches and enforce quota limits, many found their quotas were too low to make a living. Small scale fishers say that they have now been forced either to rent quota at exorbitant prices, or to switch over to non-quota species like shellfish to survive.

In the UK, the system of producer organisations has been distorted by their role in the quota market. This has allowed the biggest quota-holders to form their own “in-house” producer organisations – essentially collectives with only one member. This allows private companies to directly hold, manage swap and lease quota domestically and internationally.

In England and Wales particularly, overseas owners have also bought up vast swaths of fishing rights. The Unearthed investigation also found that around half of England’s quota is held on Dutch, Spanish, or Icelandic-owned “flagships”, so called because they sail under a British flag. One Dutch multinational alone controls around a quarter of English quota. By comparison, the UK’s small scale, inshore vessels, which are largely made up of ‘share’ fishers which are only paid when a catch is landed, must fish from a pool of quota amounting to less than two per cent, despite making up around 79 per cent of the UK fishing fleet.

A coalition of small-scale fishermen, academic experts and conservationists have argued for new fisheries law in the UK to reassert the fact that fisheries are a public resource, and to give ministers the power and the duty to distribute quota in a way that secures the greatest social, environmental and economic benefits.

“In essence, fisheries have been accidentally privatised,” New Economics Foundation researcher Griffin Carpenter told MPs tasked with scrutinising the fisheries bill. “Every year, quota is allocated to the same holders, and there is a legitimate expectation that that continues in future.

“The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) and other organisations are too scared to break that hold on the quota and say, ‘This year we will allocate quota differently.’ It has not been done; it is basically privatised now the claim is so strong.

“If there is ever a point to break that link, it is now,” he said.
Fishing is one of the most uncertain income sources in the UK as well as being the ‘most fatal’ occupation in the country. The most common form of contractual pay is the crew share model where fishers receive a proportion of the vessel earnings. In some fisheries it is typical to deduct operating costs (eg fuel, quota leasing, ice, and harbour dues) before calculating crew share. Often this is a hand to mouth existence that is not sustainable or attractive to a new generation fishers that will be required if the industry is to develop in a post-Brexit Britain.

It is clear that the government must take responsibility for such an important industry as fishing for it to have any chance to survive and flourish. This must mean in the short term a reversal of the privatisation of the broken quota system and taking democratic control of Britain’s fishing grounds to build fairer and more sustainable methods that benefit local coastal communities and not just a few millionaires.

Much can be learnt from the Norwegian experience and it should be recalled that a primary factor in Norway’s decision’s not to join the EU was its determination to retain and protect its fishing waters, its fish stocks and its fishing industry.

The Norwegians have not only retained sovereignty over their fishing grounds, but they patrol and police them rigorously. By contrast Britain’s maritime patrolling regime is pathetically inadequate and needs to be substantially expanded and strengthened.

Questioning in Parliament by Kelvin Hopkins MP has revealed that Britain has just three vessels patrolling its coastal seas around a mainland coastline of nearly 8,000 miles, a national embarrassment for an historic maritime and naval country.

Norway has twelve armed vessels policing its waters both to prevent illegal fishing off its coasts but also to regulate permitted fishing. It was subsequently suggested in Parliament through an Early Day Motion that a new fleet of coastal patrol vessels should be ordered and that, freed from the constraints of EU compulsory competitive tendering, these new vessels should be built in British shipyards on the Clyde and elsewhere. This would bring a much-needed boost to British manufacturing as well as providing an effective force to police British waters for the future.

Ultimately a new approach to fishing will be required which must involve those who work in the industry. Yet it is only the government and state planning which could make such a popular programme of renewal possible. Those who harness our new-found independence from the EU and with the political vision to make this happen will surely win the support of coastal communities that live on these islands and beyond.
This pamphlet tells the story and depth of the betrayal of fishing communities by generations of politicians. It has also argued that it is up to working people to no longer turn a blind eye to the plight of these vulnerable and precarious coastal communities. Indeed, it one of life’s cruellest ironies that they live and work next to one of this country’s greatest renewable resource, our seas.

In post-Brexit Britain, regardless of which way you may have voted in 2016, surely one of the most pressing issues now is to rebuild our industries better than before after decades of neglect and managed decline.

As workers we must no longer see the fishing industry and the communities that rely on it as somehow separate from our struggles for a better Britain. In fact, championing their cause for a safer, fairer, planned and more sustainable industry would be a good place to start in order to build a different kind of society based on solidarity, equality and dignity at work.

The maritime war memorial at Tower Hill in London bears the names of the many trawlers lost to Nazi attacks during World War Two as they fed the nation with the loss of around 1,500 fishermen. We are indebted to them and millions clearly feel an affinity to those fishing communities even if the political establishment has let them down time and again. Now is the time for politicians and political parties to recognise that sacrifice as well as 50 years of betrayal and honour that debt.

As part of any post Brexit settlement it will be crucial to fight for the interests of the fishing industry and the coastal communities they rely on which are now largely deprived areas with currently little hope of regeneration. Re-building our fishing industry would be emblematic of this opportunity to rebuild Britain in a new fairer and more sustainable way.

Conclusions

We say:

- Fair and equal fishing opportunities for coastal communities
- Developing a new sustainable management system that considers the industry as a whole and not just for profit
- Stop coastal deprivation by investing in an industry that could create thousands of jobs
- Re-instate legislation to prevent foreign fishing fleets from operating in British territorial waters
- Stop modern slavery on fishing vessels whereby wealthy quota holders hire it out at low rates of pay
- Create the infrastructure for training and modern apprenticeships to encourage a new generation into the industry
- Support working fishing communities against large multinationals that do not contribute to local economies
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