Social and economic importance of fisheries discussed at IFRE Conference

The recent International Institute of Fisheries Economics and Trade (IFET) conference in Aberdeen (Fishing News, 4 August) held a special session to discuss the social and economic importance of fisheries, and how this should be taken into account in policy decision-making.

The session was organised and chaired by Suzannah Walmsley, fisheries expert at AIPenD, and benefited from a broad range of viewpoints and contributions from industry, government, and researchers.

Using the Scottish Marine Protected Area (MPA) process as a focal point, Suzannah Walmsley opened the session and gave an overview of the need for social and economic assessment and the kinds of indicators that are used.

The session aimed to explore both industry’s concern with socio-economic assessment, and decision-makers’ needs in assessing the impacts of different policies across a range of sectors, of which fisheries is one of many. The presentation and discussion that followed raised a number of interesting points.

Economics should be a friend to the industry

Dale Rodnight, Assistant Chief Executive of the National Federation of Fisherman’s Organisations (NFFO), highlighted that economic valuation should be a friend to the industry, but often isn’t — there have been many cases where economic information has been used against the industry. Based on economic information, NGOs advocated that the French fleet was not viable in deep-sea fisheries, and economic analysis using different measures compared recreational and commercial bass fisheries to argue for priority for the recreational sector.

Data needs to be fit for purpose

The data available for social and economic valuations often come from compliance reporting datasets (e.g. VMS, landings), which are not necessarily ideal for impact assessment purposes. Threshol detached fisheries are often disadvantaged in this, as not all their catches must be reported and they are therefore undervalued in such assessments. In these situations, specific studies may be needed to complement existing datasets.

Aggregation of data hides local details

An issue that was raised several times was that the aggregation of data — providing high-level information at the level of the fleet — can be useful, but it can hide local level impacts. Bertie Armstrong, Chief Executive of the Scottish Fishermen’s Federation (SFF), highlighted that evidence used must be at the correct scale, and impacts should be considered in relation to their importance to the local — not national — scale.

As management proposals change, impact assessments need to change

Bertie Armstrong highlighted that the Scottish process was sound, but that it went wrong and that we need to learn from past mistakes. In some cases, the management measures that were put forward were very different from what had been discussed with the industry, and, he argued, would have a huge impact on those affected.Stephen Mangi, CEFAS, gave an example of a proposed EU deep-sea fishing regulation that would have had a significant impact on the UK fleet, but the economic assessment was able to offer alternative options to minimise the impact. As the proposed regulation changed, the impacts would also change, and the assessment should be updated.

Don’t compare apples with pears

There are many different indicators and approaches that can be used for economic valuation of different industry sectors, such as the value of landings, gross value added (GVA), net profit margin, jobs and total economic value (TEV). Shannon Anderson also highlighted that any assessment involves a judgement of which impacts matter most, but when comparing costs and benefits between different sectors, it is important to compare like with like.

Fisheries need earlier consideration in the marine planning process

The process for selecting Marine Conservation Zones in England included guidelines on biological features and ecological representativeness for the network, but there was no guidance on social and economic effects. Industry highlighted concerns that information on the importance of areas to fishing is often included relatively late in the process, after the momentum behind a particular plan or proposal has almost been generated. There are a number of spatial tools that can be used to help determine areas of relatively higher importance to fisheries, and these could be included in marine plans to help safeguarded areas for fishing.

Taking into account fishers’ activity

Impact assessments are based on past activity and landings value, but fishing is inherently variable, and fishers change their behaviour. Dale Rodnight noted that other sectors (agriculture extraction, renewable energy) have specific area guidelines, but future development indicated for MPA’s, but future use by fisherman is discounted because assessments are based on past use patterns. In the case of MPAs, impact assessments consider the environmental benefits of protection within the MPA, but not the additional potential environmental impacts outside the MPA from displacement of fishing to other areas, because of the uncertainty in what and where these impacts might be.

An adaptive approach to monitoring and implementation

Cornelius Slijkhuis, Senior Economist and Head of the Marine Analytical Unit of Marine Scotland, recognised that there were limitations of processes for assessment and monitoring. In the spatial distribution of activity on a finer scale, and on how impacts may change over time. He outlined the monitoring and adaptive approach that Marine Scotland is developing in respect of marine protected areas, in which it will use data to monitor socio-economic impacts on the industry and enable the need to intervene (e.g based on changes in marine resource use patterns, competition between resource users, economic impacts of closures). There will always, however, be difficulties in attributing changes to the MPAs.

Fisheries have value beyond the fish landed

Throughout the discussion, it was clear that fisheries provide more than just the numbers generated by economic impact assessments or total economic value. Economic valuation can only provide a proxy of value — fishing is often a livelihood choice and a way of life with benefits that extend throughout the wider community, and economic impacts reflect only part of the benefit of fishing to society. There are other social and cultural aspects that people value, such as having a supply of fresh fish that we should do more to promote. ‘living’ fishing ports which attract visitors, and the cultural importance attached to these areas.

Taking a wellbeing perspective

Robert Arthur from MRAe sought to highlight the ways in which these relational and subjective aspects are overlooked or avoided when economic analyses focus on aggregate material benefits. The non-material dimensions highlight the role that individual and collective values play in determining what matters most to different groups. As the presentations and discussions had emphasised, policy makers need to understand the implications.

When debates are limited to comparisons of economic value and trade-offs, it is likely that these other dimensions of wellbeing are downplayed, and the benefits of fishing are overlooked or ultimately discounted. The key challenge is to find inclusive ‘people-centred’ ways for different voices, and the wider values that they represent, to inform and influence policy decisions.

Coastal PO gets EMFF funding

The UK government has offered the Coastal PO significant development funding through the European Maritime & Fisheries Fund (EMFF), reports Tim Oliver.

The PO is already investing the money in getting ready to trade as a recognised PO in January 2017, though a Coastal PO has to be in place ‘as much as possible’. The PO is ‘much to be done’ before then. He said that discussions for a national series of meetings and consultation meetings have been agreed, venues are being booked, and they’re moving on. While the consultation takes place, the PO is also investing in the recruitment of a full-time PO officer, the UK’s first small-scale PO set up specifically to benefit coastal fishermen.

As a member of the largest agricultural purchasing group in the UK, with a buying power in excess of £225m, the Coastal PO has gained access for its members to significant economies of scale, expertise and resources.

These resources and the funds from the EMFF are now being allocated to help the Coastal PO achieve its stated objective of ‘more money, for more fishermen, from more fish in the sea, for ever’.

The Coastal PO spokesman said the PO’s objectives fit very well with the UK’s EMFF and government plans for the development of the UK’s small-scale coastal fleet.

He said: "While the PO Board made up of working fishermen and fisheries experts, one no one understands the situation that the under-10 fleet finds itself in, through no fault of its own, more than these men. "The original aim of the PO and one that we still focus on is to give under-10s genuine control of their own destiny and the clout, resources, and ability to change things for the better. The consultation meetings are the chance for members to design and implement their preferred structure for the organisation that will ensure that it is fully, genuinely and accountable to its members. "The alternative to the Coastal PO is simple — a continuing decline through being content to leave it to others to influence the decisions that make that difference between financial survival, or otherwise, for the under-10 fleet."