The Atlantic Arc concept: a step towards more cooperation and less conflict among European fishermen?

Le concept d'Arc Atlantique: une étape vers plus de coopération et moins de conflits entre les pêcheurs européens?

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Abstract: The fishing industry in Europe has been subjected to a range of national, international and, under the EU's Common Fisheries Policy, supranational systems of management. With overfishing still rife and conflict between fishermen commonplace, none of these systems has yet provided a political-geographical structure within which fishery resources are effectively managed. Therefore, the idea of devolving greater management responsibility to regional or local bodies such as Producer's Organisations (POs) is gaining ground. This paper introduces an additional regional dimension into the debate by examining whether the transnational "Atlantic Arc" concept has the potential to facilitate greater cooperation and less conflict among rival national groups of fishermen operating off the EU's western shores.

Keywords: Europe - Fishery - Policy - Atlantic - Region

Résumé: L'industrie des pêches en Europe a été soumise à divers systèmes de gestion, soit national, soit international et, en ce qui concerne la politique commune de la pêche de l'UE, supranational. Etant donné la persistance de la surpêche et les conflits fréquents entre pêcheurs, il est évident qu'aucun de ces systèmes n'a pu créer un cadre géopolitique qui facilite une bonne gestion des ressources halieutiques. L'idée de décentraliser certaines responsabilités de gestion au profit d'organisations régionales ou locales, telles que les Organisations de Producteurs (OP), gagne donc du terrain. Cette communication ajoute une autre dimension régionale au débat en posant la question suivante : est-ce que le concept transnational d'un "Arc Atlantique" constitue un cadre régional qui facilitera une meilleure coopération et moins de conflits entre les groupes nationaux de pêcheurs rivaux qui exploitent les eaux du littoral occidental de l'UE ?

Mots-clés: Europe - Pêcherie - Politique - Atlantique - Région

The aim of this paper is to examine the following question; can the transnational "Atlantic Arc" concept provide a political-geographical framework within which the endemic conflicts between fishermen on the EU's western coasts can be more effectively resolved, thus leading to greater cooperation in a more rational exploitation of overfished resources. In order to do this, it will first describe the various institutional and spatial structures which have been associated with the development of European fishery policy in the past. These political-geographical systems can be categorised as follows: international, supranational, national and sub-national or "regional". The nature and rationale of each of these systems will be briefly explained along with summary assessment of how successful they have been in providing effective fishery management. Then the current interest in sub-national regional systems of fishery management will be identified, followed by a discussion of the Atlantic Arc concept.

I - SYSTEMS OF FISHERY MANAGEMENT IN EUROPE

A - International systems

For much of this century, fisheries were an international common-property resource open to all. This legal regime led to serious overfishing and international conflict between rival fishermen. Consequently, fishing states established international agreements and agencies designed to control fishing effort and determine who could fish what stocks in what areas (Wise, 1984). The North Sea Fisheries Convention of 1882 was one of the first significant moves of this kind, followed by the creation of the International Council for the Exploitation of the Sea (ICES) in 1899. As overfishing grew and international conflicts over fishing rights intensified, other European organisations were created to tackle these interlinked issues of fisheries conservation and

Essentially, these international systems of fishery management conceded the right to claim small exclusive national fishing zones (out to 12 miles in the 1964 Convention) while trying to establish a degree of international control over the exploitation of fisheries in the vast sea areas which remained common property. However, the politically impotent international bodies set up for this task proved incapable of checking the growth of overfishing and the increasingly bitter struggle for resources among European fishermen. This was a major factor explaining growing support for national solutions to conflicts about access to, and conservation of, sea fisheries.

**B - National systems**

Despite the development of the international fishery organisations referred to above, there have always been national responses to problems of fishery access and conservation. For example, in 1869, Norway began to erode the concept of the seas as an international common property resource by enclosing vast bay and fjord areas for the exclusive use of Norwegian fishermen. Thereafter, certain European states (notably Iceland) which had rich fisheries around their coasts, successfully laid claim to ever wider exclusive national fishing zones. They argued that this national approach to fishing rights was essential in order to protect their national fishing industries from foreign competitors and conserve the resources upon which they depended. In their view, only a sovereign nation-state government has the will and ability to implement effective measures to conserve and allocate fish stocks (Wise, 1984).

Thus, in 1964, the European Fisheries Convention confirmed the right of all states to claim a 12-mile exclusive national fishing zone around their shores, although the sea fisheries beyond remained open to all. This compromise between national and international systems of fishery exploitation did not last. The national expropriation of sea space for fishing continued, ultimately leading to Iceland's 200-mile limit in 1975. Other countries followed the Icelandic example and 200-mile-median line Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) around maritime states became accepted by the majority of states in the United Nations Conference on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS III). The European Community (EC) member states simultaneously adopted such EEZs in concert on January 1st 1977. Thus a radically new political geography of fishing rights had evolved in which international systems of resource allocation and conservation had been overwhelmed, although not completely eliminated, by the extension of national sovereignty over the seas.

**C - Supranational systems**

The introduction of the EC's Common Fisheries Policy (CFP) by the original "Six" member states in 1971 added a supranational element to the national and international systems set up to allocate and conserve the fishery resources exploited by European fishing fleets. The term supranational is used to denote a system where a common fishery policy based upon EC law is decided within common European institutions. It describes a political body of an essentially confederal character where Community law, once decided, takes precedence over national legislation. As such, supranational organisations are very different to those of an international nature where national governments retain their political sovereignty and are far less constrained by common legislative institutions of a quasi-federal character.

Thus, the supranational CFP requires that the catching, conservation and trading of fish caught within the 200-mile-median line zones of EC member states be organised at European Union level on the basis of European law (Council,1983). In particular, the principle that there must be no discrimination according to nationality among member states (Article 7 of the Rome Treaty) is a fundamental element of the CFP. This directly contradicts the foundations of national systems of fishery management. Thus, in direct conflict with the concept of exclusive national fishing zones, the CFP requires that the free trade of fish within a European single market should be matched by equality of access to EU fishing grounds for member state fishermen free of national discrimination (the so-called "equal access" provision). Similarly, a common conservation policy should be developed by EC institutions and applied free of national discriminations by all the member states. Of course, other forms of discrimination (for example, against certain types of fishing) can be applied.

A rationale for this "European" approach to fishery policy is also found by reference to the biogeographical fact that most fish stocks do not respect the national fishing limits of member states. Moreover, it has been argued that supranational institutions have the political power to
develop effective fishery policies, whereas national governments (too limited geographically) and international bodies (too weak politically) do not. However, such arguments have become less persuasive as overfishing of European waters has continued and conflicts between EU fishermen persist.

D - Sub-national regional systems

A concern to protect sub-national regions thought to be particularly dependent on fishing has always been apparent in the evolution of the CFP (Wise, 1984, 1996). For example, 12-mile coastal fishing zones have been reserved for local fishermen, protective fishing "boxes" have been created around Ireland and peripheral regions like the Orkneys and Shetlands (Fig. 1) while preferential quotas have been allocated to areas with a high dependence on fishing. This regional approach to fishery management does not offend EU principles prohibiting discrimination according to nationality. Furthermore, it accords well with the contemporary emphasis on the decentralising concept of subsidiarity reinforced in the Treaty on European Union (Council, 1992).

Thus, the idea of devolving greater management responsibility to bodies such as local Producer's Organisations (POs) is gaining ground (Holden, 1993; Symes, 1994). The basic rationale behind this approach assumes: first, that there are distinctive regional fishing fleets exploiting particular sea areas and, second, that a more rational exploitation of fisheries will occur if responsibility is devolved from remote central EC and national institutions to those directly involved in the fishing industry at a regional level.

![Fig. 1: European fishing zones](image-url)
E - Transnational regional systems

Examination of these new regional approaches should not be restricted to consideration of subnational regional bodies. The concept of "European" super-regions straddling national territories (Fig. 2) is also promoted by the EU on the grounds that existing political-geographical structures may be ill-adapted to deal with cross-border problems (Commission 1991). The possibility that there may be such "functional" fishing regions in Europe, tied together by transnational trade links and common patterns of fisheries exploitation, merits consideration. If such regions can be defined, they may help construct a management structure leading to a more rational use of Europe's overexploited fisheries. One such possible transnational region is suggested by the "Atlantic Arc" concept.

![Atlantic Arc as one of the EC macro-regions defined by the European Commission in the "Europe 2000" report](source: EC Commission, 1991)

II - THE TRANSNATIONAL ATLANTIC ARC CONCEPT: A WAY TOWARDS LESS CONFLICT AND MORE COOPERATION AMONG FISHERMEN?

The concept of such an "Arc" extending along the maritime margins of the European Union suggests the existence of a transnational region sharing common characteristics, interests and problems (Morvan, 1989). It is argued that the different parts of this peripheral maritime "super-region" should cooperate in order to develop more effectively their indigenous resources. This idea has penetrated EU policy-making circles and led to the creation of a transnational Atlantic Arc Commission (Atlantic Arc Commission, 1992) grouping local authorities from northern Scotland to southern Portugal (Fig. 3). Furthermore, the European Commission financed a study of the Atlantic areas as part of its formulation of a regional development strategy for the Community as a whole (Commission, 1994-a).

Inevitably, fishing is seen as one sector where coordinated development should develop along the Arc. More than a third of the total EU catch tonnage is made by fishermen from the Atlantic regions, while in terms of value nearly half of the EU landings come from this zone. Furthermore, some 40% of EU fishing capacity is located in the Arc, operated by about 46% of the EU's total number of fishermen (Commission 1994-a). Given their shared dependence on fishing grounds off the Atlantic littoral, there is clearly an argument in favour of greater transnational regional collaboration among the competing fishermen from different countries of the Arc. However, conflict is endemic between rival EU fish producers operating in this maritime zone, thus raising serious doubts about the possibilities of greater transnational regional cooperation.
Conflict among fishermen of the Atlantic Arc

Disputes frequently flare up along the Atlantic littoral as rival groups fight about access to overfished resources. The "tuna war" which broke out in the Bay of Biscay during the summer of 1994 typified these disputes among French, Spanish, British and Irish fishermen with clashes over the types of fishing gear to be permitted, the amounts of fish to be taken, market access, the meaning of fisheries conservation and so on. Nationalistic attitudes inflamed the dispute, as did fears of reduced incomes and job losses in Atlantic regions already suffering high levels of unemployment. A concern about dolphins destroyed in the tuna fishery also drew conservation bodies such as Greenpeace into the conflict. Rival groups of fishermen intimidated each other at sea, tuna imports into northern Spain were blocked and fishery protection vessels from Spain, France, Ireland and the UK were dispatched to defend their national fleets and keep conservationists out of the fray.

Regional differences within countries further complicated the situation. For example, the Spanish regional government of Galicia sent its own "gun boat" to protect its fishermen, while the Basque authorities sought alternative tuna fisheries for their fleet off the Portuguese islands of Madeira and the Azores. The EU's Association of National Fishermen's Organisations (EUROPECHE) was split on the issue, while both European supranational and national authorities proved incapable of taking swift preventative action.

Elsewhere in the Atlantic Arc region, other conflicts continue to simmer, not least over the question of who can fish what, when and where within the so-called "Irish Box" (Fig. 1). Disputes about transnational fish trade along the Arc also break out periodically. Fishermen in Brittany and Normandy have periodically blocked UK imports which undercut French landing prices as the British currency depreciates in a market that, without a single currency, is not as "common" as...
some assume. Furthermore, the direct sales of "British" fish into Spain by the so-called "quota-hopping" Anglo-Spanish fleet, angers fishing interests in South West England who see part of their resources being caught and traded by an essentially Spanish fleet.

B - The potential for fishery cooperation within the Atlantic Arc

Given these serious conflicts, the idea of developing transnational regional management structures for fisheries may appear unrealistic. It is easy to argue that national and regional fragmentation of the Atlantic zone is so deep-rooted that fishermen are condemned to a competitive struggle for individual survival with all the consequences this has for resource depletion, unemployment and social dislocation. Nevertheless, there is evidence that some fishermen in the Arc perceive a need for greater cooperation. For example, fishermen from South-West England and Brittany have established the "Mid-Channel Potting Conference" which protects English and Channel Island crabbbers (who sell much of their catch in France) from the activities of French, Belgian and British trawlers. Other disputes between English drift-netters and Breton trawlers in shared waters have been settled by regular cooperation between local fishing organisations based in Brittany and Cornwall.

The EU’s Pesca initiative seeks to develop such cooperative action among fishermen from different countries of the Atlantic regions. It offers grants to facilitate the restructuring of the fishing industry and the development of alternative sources of employment. Among other things, it encourages « specific projects of a... transnational nature in the fisheries sectors » including those designed to promote « common management of shared fisheries » (Commission, 1994-b).

Noting the lack of cross-boundary mechanisms to facilitate the discussion of common fisheries management issues, the draft Pesca Programme for South-West England envisages a Working Group which would work towards the establishment of a transnational regional organisation involving partners from South-West England, Brittany, South West Ireland and, hopefully, North-West Spain (South-West Pesca Programme, 1994). This Group, would seek common solutions to their common problems in bottom-up fashion rather than expect top-down answers being imposed on them from national or European government.

Similarly,

« ...the existence of the Atlantic Arc Commission can help Member Regions and their respective sectors of (fisheries) production to get to know each other better and cooperate actively on matters of mutual interest and strive to eliminate conflict... »

(Atlantic Arc Commission, 1995)

The aim is not to set up a single regional entity to manage all the diverse fisheries from the Canaries to the Shetlands. Instead, the strategy of the Commission is to facilitate the creation of diverse bilateral or multilateral accords specifically adapted to deal with specific problems. Once again it is possible to detect a nascent desire to build practical transnational regional fishery management structures which could form a fundamental element of a new, decentralised CFP system after present arrangements end in 2002.

In this context, the Commission has established a Fisheries and Fish Farming Working Group to encourage fishing interests of the Atlantic regions to act in unison by formulating proposals between 1995 and 1999 to foster the harmonious development of the resources upon which they depend (Atlantic Arc Commission, 1995). A range of proposals has already been put forward including the organisation of inter-regional meetings, first to exchange information and produce joint analyses on fisheries in the Irish Box and, secondly, to analyze the various fishing practices in the Bay of Biscay.

The substantial trade in fish products between the Atlantic regions reveals that the Arc concept takes its most concrete functional form in the substantial commercial links binding northern fish producers to southern fish consumers on Europe’s western margins. Within the EU’s single market, the greater part of catches landed in many British and Irish ports is destined for more lucrative markets in France and Spain. Furthermore, direct landings by British vessels in continental ports, particularly in North-West France, have increased to a point where British food processors protest at the loss of business. Similar economic imperatives also lead to growing transnational investment in fleets throughout the Arc. The Spanish purchase of British, Irish and French fishing boats is but one example of an increasing economic integration of the fishing industry along the Atlantic coast (Wise, 1996 ; Fishing News International, 1994). Of course, strong British opposition to these so-called "Anglo-Spanish" vessels is a reminder that such transnational integration can engender serious conflict. To the fury of both fishermen and politicians in South-West England, this large
"Anglo-Spanish" fleet exploits "British" fishing quotas off South-West England. This has provoked a long-running legal battle in European Court of Justice that has still not been satisfactorily resolved (Wise, 1996). Moreover, as already noted, trade blockades periodically disrupt the flow of fish products between countries of the Arc. Nevertheless, the underlying forces for further economic integration of the fishing industry along the Atlantic littoral persist, thus providing an additional pressure for joint action within transnational regional structures.

Conclusion

The fishing industry in Europe has been subjected to a range of national, international, and supranational management systems over the last century. Today, the CFP, while essentially supranational in character, incorporates elements of all these approaches (Wise, 1984). With overfishing still rife and conflict between fishermen commonplace, it is clear that none of these systems has provided a satisfactory political-geographical framework within which to conserve and allocate fishery resources. As the CFP approaches reform in 2002, the idea of devolving more power to regional management structures is gaining momentum. This paper adds a transnational dimension to this debate by asking whether the Atlantic Arc concept has any potential to facilitate greater cooperation and less conflict within the fishing industry operating off the EU's western shores.

At present, it is impossible to answer this question with confidence. Despite the tentative steps taken towards more cooperation, mutual suspicion among the Arc's fishermen still runs deep. Although the Atlantic Arc Commission presents itself as a neutral agency promoting cooperation, there are those, notably in the British Isles, who view it suspiciously as a vehicle primarily designed to serve French and Spanish interests. Furthermore, fishermen throughout the Arc are uneasy that the Galicia region of North-East Spain has been given the responsibility for coordinating the Fisheries and Fish Farming Working Group set up by Atlantic Arc Commission (Atlantic Arc Commission, 1995).

Indeed, by the mid-1990s this climate of distrust had led British fishermen in the Atlantic Arc areas to lend vigorous support to the Save Britain's Fish campaign. This aims to withdraw the UK from the CFP and reinstate a national fishery policy based on an exclusive 200-mile-median-line zone. Given that a significant number of British MPs support such a return to national systems of fishery management based on the Norwegian and Icelandic models, it is even conceivable that the UK government will face defeat as it tries to maintain support for the CFP. But, even if the UK was able to extricate itself from the CFP, the need for fisheries cooperation with other parts of the Atlantic Arc would remain. Producers in South-West England would still want to sell most of their fish in French and Iberian markets and fishermen from the more southerly countries would still seek fishing opportunities further north. Satisfactory ways of organising multi-national fishing activities in the Bay of Biscay and around the British Isles will still need to be found, otherwise conflicts at sea will continue. Thus, an imperative to create transnational arrangements to manage access to fishing grounds and fishery markets along the Atlantic Arc zone of the EU will remain whatever the supranational, national or regional fishery regimes in force.

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