Fisheries

Sarah Wollaston (Totnes Conservative) Click here to watch Parliament Live

I am fortunate to represent Brixham and fishing is the absolute heart of Brixham. The catch there is worth Â£17 million a year. The jobs involved are not just those at sea; there are many more related jobs on land. That is particularly important in Torbay, where there are 3,500 people claiming jobseeker's allowance.

The English channel fisheries are worth more than Â£70 million a year at first sale and 60% of that money comes from non-quota species, such as scallop, crab, bass and lemon sole. That is particularly important because, for its size, the English channel is the richest sea area-in pounds per square mile-in European waters.

Of course, those rich fisheries exist because of rich habitats. We all understand that the Minister has to tread a very careful line between protecting habitats and protecting livelihoods. However, when he signs statutory orders protecting sites, he creates offences that carry penalties of Â£50,000 or more and he needs to take great care to ensure that areas closed to fishing are absolutely necessary and evidence-based, in terms of giving a chance for regeneration of fish stocks that can then contribute to fishing livelihoods.

Commissioner Maria Damanaki has recently praised the work of trawlermen in Brixham who are involved in Project 50%. In that project, skippers such as Shaun Gibbs work closely with net designers, including Darren Edwards in Brixham, to innovate at their own expense, by designing new gear that allows small fish to escape and that significantly reduces the by-catch. In fact, they have managed to reduce discards by more than 50%, which of course saves fuel, preserves stocks and reduces the impact of the benthic species.

I ask the Minister to press the case for such projects to be recognised and to provide an incentive for others to follow suit, by rewarding them with increasing quotas for the key target species, such as Dover sole, anglerfish or monkfish and plaice. It is also very important that he recognises that the Commission's proposal to change the management regime of channel plaice, particularly in areas VIIId and VIIle, would have far-reaching implications beyond the simple quota tonnage numbers. Those areas are currently managed in combination, but if they are split that would result in a large increase in discards in area VIIle, which is the western channel, particularly in the beam trawler fisheries in my constituency.

I think that we would all agree that policy drivers must be consistent. There is no point having projects such as Project 50% if we are going to see discards driven up by measures that are poorly thought through and by policies that are, frankly, inconsistent. Has the Centre for Environment, Fisheries and Aquaculture Science been asked to conduct a full regulatory impact assessment of the Commission's proposal, including an assessment of how many perfectly healthy plaice will be thrown back into the sea dead if a mixed fishery catching sole is unable to land perfectly good plaice over quota? I call on the Minister to resist the proposal to split areas VIIId and VIIle for that reason.

The Commission proposes a 15% increase in the available catch of sole, but it is accepted
that the TAC for area VIIe should not have been reduced by even 5%, because, as I understand it, the status quo would have yielded a full improvement in the spawning stock. As my constituents see it, the only fair outcome is the full, scientifically justified 19% increase in the TAC for 2011, and I hope that the Minister will press for that.

The skate distribution among member states is unfair. We recognise that it is unlikely to be reworked, so I call instead on the Minister to press for an increase in the quota so that skippers can land what they catch rather than discarding skate. We all recognise that current arrangements are not preserving stocks; they are just causing dead fish to be thrown back into the sea.

We believe that sprats are not depleted. One of the many daft Commission rules is "use it or lose it". I think that many Members here share my hope that the Minister will resist further reductions for under-utilisation.

I represent not just the beam trawler fleet but the under-10-metre fleet. I am sure that the Minister recognises that the two fleets sometimes have conflicting interests, but there are issues common to them both. They both agree that the "use it or lose it" proposals are counter-productive, particularly when it comes to the under-10-metre fleet. Skippers pay large sums to acquire vessels, often with a high premium because they come with a shellfish quota that the skippers do not wish to use. I hope that he will look into that issue. Such skippers are also disadvantaged because they must often buy vessels that are under-equipped in terms of engine power to fish safely or efficiently. They would like me to draw to the Minister’s attention the unfair discrimination that they face when compared with the recreational and charter fleet. They often fish alongside such vessels, using the same methodology, but they face expensive restrictions in terms of training courses and qualifications, and of course the charter and recreational fleet has no quota. I call on him to consider that issue.

I extend the Minister a warm invitation to come back to Brixham. He kindly visited before the election, but at that time we had not completed our wonderful new fish market, which was funded in part by DEFRA. I know that all my colleagues in Brixham would warmly welcome him. I close by paying tribute, again, to the work of the Royal National Mission to Deep Sea Fishermen, the RNLI and the coast guard.

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