



Increasing the cod stock – an environmental measure that benefits Baltic Sea fisheries

There is scientific consensus that two of the major problems for the Baltic Sea are eutrophication and over fishing. Moreover, there is agreement that problems with eutrophication will take more than 30 years to unravel, while over fishing could be dealt with in just a few years, if proper measures are taken.

Background

Cod plays an important role for commercial fisheries around the Baltic, but it is also crucial to the upkeep of a functioning ecosystem in the Baltic Sea. Loss of a major predator such as cod in the ecosystem will lead to severe chain reactions. New studies suggest a strong connection between cod shortage and the extent of algal bloom afflicting Baltic countries every summer. In short, the decline of cod in the Baltic has led to increased symptoms of eutrophication, as sprat and herring are increasing in numbers. Sprat and herring feed on zooplankton which have thereby decreased and contributed to the large increase in phytoplankton. Therefore, a sustainable cod stock is an environmental issue. Saving the Baltic Sea cod fishery is therefore probably the most clear-cut and possibly also the most cost-effective environmental measure that we can undertake. If we fish less now, we will be able to fish more in the future.

Although the Common European Fisheries policy is aimed at sustainable exploitation, it has failed to achieve this. Instead, the annual decision on cod quotas, made by the European Fisheries Ministers, has consistently favoured short-term interests. The decisions have favoured neither fish stocks nor commercial fisheries. The damage done by unsustainable quotas is compounded by substantial illegal and unreported fishing. In Poland, ministers in the previous government actively supported illegal, unreported fishing!

Cod is the most valuable fish in the Baltic Sea. A large proportion of the region's fishermen are dependent on viable cod stocks. Cod fisheries in the region are dominated by Poland, Denmark

and Sweden. Also Germany, Latvia, Lithuania and Russia land substantial catches. Depleted stocks have contributed to decreasing profitability throughout the region.

Year after year the ministers have decided upon cod quotas that far exceed the recommendations of ICES (International Council for the Exploration of the Sea), a body of fisheries scientists with the explicit task of presenting the best possible knowledge on sustainable quotas. In December 2007 the ministers adopted a recovery plan for the eastern cod stock and the recommendations of ICES for 2009 adhere to this plan, which gives the region an opportunity to improve the situation. The countries in the Baltic Sea region have well-established democratic institutions that should be able to base their decisions on qualified scientific assessments.

Today's fishing industry is a burden to our national economies. In many cases, fishing revenues fail to cover costs, especially when aid and subsidies from the EU and Member States are taken into account. All Baltic countries would benefit from an increased cod stock, particularly those countries wishing to see a bright future for the fishing industry. The conflict between sustainability and economic and social concerns only exists in the short run. In the long run there will be no fishing industry, and no coastal communities depending on fisheries, if stocks are depleted and the seas empty.

Objective

The October Council meeting constitutes an annual opportunity to influence the environment of the Baltic Sea, by ensuring that the cod stock is rebuilt. The agenda

of Baltic Sea 2020 is very simple. ICES defines how much fish can be caught in the Baltic Sea and their recommendations must be the guiding principle for all quota decisions taken by the ministers. Reduced fishing pressure will have a rapid effect on the stock. Simulations performed by Baltic Sea 2020 show that the cod management plan would produce a surprisingly powerful effect. Within five years, catches could double and the cod stocks could nearly triple. If we look even further into the future, catches could increase even more. This would radically improve conditions for the Baltic fishing industry.

Method

Baltic Sea 2020 will work to ensure that the cod recovery plan is followed. And if not, we will make sure that the inhabitants of the region know that their politicians do not follow through on their own decisions and are more influenced by short-term interests. By actively engaging in dialogue with decision makers in the Baltic Sea countries and in Brussels, Baltic Sea 2020 wants to strengthen ICES' position by complementing supporting studies on economic and environmental research. The Baltic Sea cod recovery plan is a powerful tool for restoring the cod stocks in the Baltic Sea. If the Fisheries Ministers stick with the plan there will be rapid positive effects both in the environment and in the fishing industry's profitability in the Baltic Sea.