Tell people something they know already and they will thank you for it.
Tell them something new and they will hate you for it.

Kept Afloat on a Tide of Cash

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Why are governments subsidising the destruction of the marine environment?

By George Monbiot. Published in the Guardian 8th July 2008.

All over the world, protesters are engaged in a heroic battle with reality. They block roads, picket fuel depots, throw missiles and turn over cars in an effort to hold it at bay. The oil is running out and governments, they insist, must do something about it. When they’ve sorted it out, what about the fact that the days are getting shorter? What do we pay our taxes for?

The latest people to join these surreal protests are the world’s fishermen. They are on strike in Italy, Spain, Portugal, France and Japan and demonstrating in scores of maritime countries. Last month in Brussels they threw rocks and flares at the police, who have been conspiring with the world’s sedimentary basins to keep the price of oil high. The fishermen warn that if something isn’t done to help them, thousands could be forced to scrap their boats and hang up their nets. It’s an appalling prospect, which we should greet with heartfelt indifference.

Just as the oil price now seems to be all that stands between us and runaway climate change, it is also the only factor which offers a glimmer of hope to the world’s marine ecosystems. No East Asian government was prepared to conserve the stocks of tuna; now one-third of the tuna boats in Japan, China, Taiwan and South Korea will stay in dock for the next few months because they can’t afford to sail(1). The unsustainable quotas set on the US Pacific seaboard won’t be met this year, because the price of oil is rising faster than the price of fish(2). The indefinite strike called by Spanish fishermen is the best news European fisheries have had for years. Beam trawlermen – who trash the seafloor and scoop up a massive bycatch of unwanted species - warn that their industry could collapse within a year(3). Hurray to that too.

It would, of course, be better for everyone if these unsustainable practices could be shut down gently without the need for a crisis or the loss of jobs, but this seems to be more than human nature can bear. The European Union has a programme for taking fishing boats out of service – the tonnage of the European fleet has fallen by 5% since 1999(4) - but the decline in boats is too slow to overtake the decline in stocks. Every year the EU, like every other fishery authority, tries to accommodate its surplus boats by setting quotas higher than those proposed by its scientific advisers, and every year the population of several species is pressed a little closer to extinction.

The fishermen make two demands, which are taken up by politicians in coastal regions all over the world: they must be allowed to destroy their own livelihoods, and the rest of us should pay for it. Over seven years, European taxpayers will be giving this industry E3.8bn(5). Some of this money is used to take boats out of service and to find other jobs for fishermen, but the rest is used to equip boats with new engines and new gear, to keep them on the water, to modernise ports and landing sites and to promote and market the catch. Except for the funds used to re-train fishermen or help them into
early retirement, there is no justification for this spending. At least farmers can argue – often falsely – that they are the “stewards of the countryside”. But what possible argument is there for keeping more fishermen afloat than the fish population can bear?

The EU says its spending will reduce fishing pressure and help fishermen adopt greener methods. In reality, it is delaying the decline of the industry and allowing it to defy ecological limits for as long as possible. If the member states want to protect the ecosystem, it’s a good deal cheaper to legislate than to pay. Our fishing policies, like those of almost all maritime nations, are a perfect parable of commercial stupidity and short-termism, helping an industry to destroy its long-term prospects for the sake of immediate profit.

But the fishermen only demand more. The headline on this week’s Fishing News is “Thanks for Nothing!”, bemoaning the British government’s refusal to follow France, Spain and Italy in handing out fuel subsidies. But why the heck should it? The Scottish fishing secretary, Richard Lochhead, demands that the government in Westminster “open the purse strings”. He also insists that new money is “not tied to decommissioning”: in other words no more boats should be taken off the water. Is this really a service to the industry, or only to its most short-sighted members?

I have a leaked copy of the draft proposal that European states will discuss on Thursday. It’s a disaster. Some of the boats which, under existing agreements, will be scrapped and turned into artificial reefs, permanently reducing the size of the fleet, can now be replaced with smaller vessels. The EU will pay costs and salaries for crews stranded by the fuel crisis, so that they stay in business and can start fishing again when the price falls. Member states will be able to shell out more money (E100,000 per boat instead of E30,000) without breaking state aid rules. They can hand out new grants for replacing old equipment with more fuel-efficient gear. The proposal seems to be aimed at ensuring that the industry collapses through lack of fish rather than lack of fuel. The fishermen won’t go down without taking the ecosystem with them.

What makes the draft document so dumb is that in some regions, especially in British waters, the industry is just beginning to turn. While French, Spanish and Italian fishermen clamour for a resumption of bluefin tuna fishing, knowing that if they are allowed to fish now, this will be the last season ever, around the UK it has begun to dawn on some fishermen that there might be an association between the survival of the fish and the survival of the fishing. Prompted by Young’s seafood and some of the supermarkets, who in turn have been harried by environmental groups, some of the biggest British fisheries have applied for eco-labels from the Marine Stewardship Council, which sets standards for how fish are caught. Fishermen around the UK also seem to be taking the law more seriously, and at last to be showing some interest in obscure issues such as spawning grounds and juvenile fish (which, believe it or not, turn out to have a connection to future fish stocks). By ensuring that far too many boats, and far too many desperate fishermen, stay on the water, and that the remaining quotas are stretched too thinly, the EU will slow down or even reverse the greening of the industry.

Why is this issue so hard to resolve? Why does every representative of a fishing region believe he must defend his constituents’ right to ensure that their children have nothing to inherit? Why do the leaders of the fishermen’s associations feel the need always to denounce the scientists who say that fish stocks decline if they are hit too hard? If this is a microcosm of how human beings engage with the environment, the prospect for humanity is not a happy one.

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