In public debates on fishing there appears to be a gap between ‘economics’ and economics—some look for corporate profits and tax revenues alone while others seek to include a consideration of socioeconomic benefits in a broader sense.

By Quentin Bates

Sometimes I forget just how long I’ve been doing this and in all the years involved in fishing in one way or another, first at the sharp end and later as a journalist, there’s often a sneaking feeling I get that tells me I understand less of how fishing works than on that day I was shown how to sharpen a knife and told to get on with it.

Fishing is an odd business and it’s arguable that there’s no such thing as ‘the fishing industry’ that the greens, the grandees of the big NGOs and so many economists and academics so earnestly preach about, just a collection of cottage industries that have common ground in that they all catch fish in some way. A single-handed Greek netter has about as much in common with a Norwegian pelagic company as a taxi driver does with an airline executive, although both transport people.

Fishing isn’t even a big business. Sorry, I’ll rephrase that. Fishing is an extraordinarily widespread and diverse business. What’s noticeable is that there aren’t many big fish in it. A couple of European pelagic operators and Far Eastern tuna groups sit at the top of the tree, but there’s no equivalent of Coca-Cola or Monsanto, no real corporate behemoths. Even the big fishing operators are relatively small potatoes in the big scheme of things, yet they receive more flak than many megacorps and I’ve never quite been able to fathom just why there’s so much ire directed at those who get too big.

I don’t see people sneering at Elton John
FAROEAN SALMON, TURBOT

<table>
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<th>Year</th>
<th>Chilled whole</th>
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<th>Proven fillets</th>
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<td>200,000</td>
<td>60,000</td>
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FAROEAN SEAFOOD EXPORTS FOB VALUE IN DKK 1,000

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<tr>
<th>Category</th>
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<td>600,000</td>
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SEAFORD, FISHERIES, AQUACULTURE

Fishing is in many ways still an anachronism. Until the Second World War effectively turned the world order upside down, most of the wealth in the developed world’s fishing companies were carried out by hundreds of small enterprises; farmers, cattle auctions, corn merchants, blacksmiths, brewers, shops, slaughterhouses, bakers, and, yes, fishermen, processors and fishmongers. In fishing this is where the resources mostly still are. In the rest of the food business, from bread to beer to soft drinks, all that cash has been extracted from the communities where it circulated enterprises; farmers, cattle auctions, corn merchants, blacksmiths, brewers, shops, slaughterhouses, bakers, and, yes, fishermen, processors and fishmongers. In fishing this is where the resources mostly still are. In the rest of the food business, from bread to beer to soft drinks, all that cash has been extracted from the communities where it circulated.

But apply the same principles to a mixed fishery carried out by hundreds of small boats landing in nooks and crannies along a winding coastline and you have a recipe for disaster with choke species, criminalization of otherwise pretty honest small business people; unless the unsung agenda is to reduce the scope of the fishery by weeding out those who can’t cope with the sheer head-aches of it all and sell up in despair.

Fishing is in many ways still an anachronism. Until the Second World War effectively turned the world order upside down, most of the wealth in the developed world’s food chain as a whole resided with smallish enterprises; farmers, cattle auctions, corn merchants, blacksmiths, brewers, shops, slaughterhouses, bakers, and, yes, fishermen, processors and fishmongers. In fishing this is where the resources mostly still are. In the rest of the food business, from bread to beer to soft drinks, all that cash has been extracted from the communities where it circulated.

It’s not beyond the wit of man to wonder why things are not more likely the way of managing pelagic fisheries. It’s not beyond the wit of man to wonder why things are not more likely the way of managing pelagic fisheries. It’s not beyond the wit of man to wonder why things are not more likely the way of managing pelagic fisheries. It’s not beyond the wit of man to wonder why things are not more likely the way of managing pelagic fisheries.

Source: Statistics Faroes
A GOLDEN MIDDLE ROAD?

It’s arguable that the present model of food production and distribution is better for consumers, the result of vicious price wars between heavyweight chains in which a few staples become ridiculously cheap, while producers are squeezed until they squeak by retailers who are muscular enough to be able to dictate take-it-or-leave terms.

All this hasn’t yet happened to the fishing industry, which even today remains overwhelmingly composed of employed people, bought goods and services, which paid their taxes without quibbling or having vanished.

Coastal fishing boat steaming off Ebba.

It’s certainly vocal advocates of the same development taking place the fish business, in some instances this process is already well underway. But is this the model that should be applied to fishing?

By monetizing the fishing industry to extract the maximum potential revenue from it, setting up quota auctions and imposing special levies, as the smart economics graduates would have us believe is the way to go, are some fundamentals being forgotten?

As an example, there’s a scallop fishery in the English Channel. Around 700 French boats pursue this fishery every winter. These are small boats and it’s feasible that as much raw cash could be extracted from the scallop fishery at far less cost if it were conducted by half a dozen automated processing vessels working around the clock. But who gains? The canny owners of half a dozen super-scallopers would gain. The eventual losers would be the 700 small boats. Each boat has a crew of two or three, so that’s somewhere to the livelihoods of 3000 families we’re talking about, and as each job at sea supports five or six ashore, we could be talking 15,000 jobs.

So what exactly is maximum value? A couple of uber-efficient operators doing exceptionally well, or a large part of the fishing community able to live comfortably without becoming a burden on the state and the taxpayer? Or is something halfway between the two desirable? After all, blue whiting 200 miles offshore isn’t going to be caught by two men with a trawl small enough to roll up and carry under one arm. There should unquestionably be room for big operators, but they shouldn’t necessarily dominate. A small number of large operators means the industry’s diversity is lost and much of its strength lies in this diversity.

THIS IS FOOD!

There are plenty of examples of coastal communities that have been devastated as fishing rights inevitably migrate in one direction or another, a process that starts just as soon as they have a price attached to them. The cycle can be seen all over Europe and beyond. First the quotas go, then the boats are idle and finally disappear. The local fish processor closes down. People find work elsewhere and move away. Then the shops and local businesses start to close, property prices tumble and these once busy and self-reliant coastal communities become shadows of what they had once been, the fortunate ones kept afloat as what had been prosperous people’s homes become holiday cottages for city dwellers.

I used to live in just such a community, a thriving fishing village that buzzed with life and activity until, you guessed it, the local trawler company was swallowed by a bigger one. I still visit the place regularly. In fact, I own a practically valueless house in what is now a ghost town for much of the year. The shop and the petrol station are hanging on, just. Practically every house is for sale. Every youngster counts the days until they turn sixteen and can escape.

Fishing needs to retain its diversity. It needs a flock of small boats tied up at night in the shadow of a big pelagic catcher. It desperately needs to support the guys in the middle, the medium-sized boats that employ five people at sea and support another dozen ashore, and this is the sector everybody that’s under the greatest pressure to sell up and get out. The skills, traditions, expertise and the knowledge that doesn’t come from a book and can’t be reproduced in a spreadsheet all deserve to be maintained.

After all, this is food, a key building block of society, produced by an industry working under the most unpredictable conditions imaginable.

There’s far more to this than just the numbers at the bottom of a balance sheet and it’s too important to be left to economists with elegant theories to prove and politicians with an eye on nothing more distant than the next election.

Quentin Bates is a staff journalist with Fishing News International and a crime author.