

Annexe 3

ESUSG FISHERIES WORKING GROUP

Summary of the views of the 15th Meeting of the ESUSG's Fisheries Working Group in Copenhagen in October 2004

The Ecosystem Approach to Fisheries

There are many mandates, conventions, conference decisions, declarations, agreements and treaties which refer to the ecosystem approach. The approach is considered by many to be fundamental to achieving the sustainable management of human activities. Since the Treaty of Maastricht in 1992 the European Union has committed itself to an approach which emphasises the need to safeguard the environment, and the adoption of an ecosystem approach to the management of fisheries is a top priority.

Although the need for an ecosystem approach has been accepted by politicians, bureaucrats, scientists, fisheries management agencies and environmental interest groups, there is still much uncertainty about how to implement it. This may be because most definitions of what constitutes an ecosystem approach are difficult to understand. The Køge definition, arrived at by European stakeholders at the Conference on the Development of a European Strategy for the Protection and Conservation of the Marine Environment, Køge, Denmark, 4-6 December 2002, stated that an ecosystem approach is:

*"the **comprehensive integrated** management of human activities based on best available scientific knowledge about the ecosystem and its **dynamics**, in order to identify and take action on influences which are critical to the **health of the marine ecosystems**, thereby achieving sustainable use of **ecosystem goods and services** and maintenance of **ecosystem integrity**".*

This definition is almost incomprehensible in its use of undefined adjectives and phrases (highlighted). It certainly does not help us to implement an ecosystem approach.

The EU's Strategy for Sustainable Development has proposed the development of a thematic strategy to protect and conserve the marine environment. The European Commission in its Communication to the Council of the EU and the European Parliament, *Towards a strategy to protect and conserve the marine environment* (COM(2002) 539), sets out objectives and related actions to implement by 2004 a *European Marine Strategy*, with the target of developing an ecosystem-based approach, including ecosystem benchmarks and targets to

ensure conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity. Indeed the prevailing approach towards the problem of implementing an ecosystem approach, much influenced by scientists, has been to establish ecological objectives, with specific targets to be reached. Thus, a number of *ecological quality elements* have been proposed to describe the overall qualities of an ecosystem. For each ecological quality element one or more metrics can be developed and various points or levels on these metrics can be defined either by science or society. They include *ecological quality objectives* (EcoQOs), which are the target levels of an ecological quality element, set relative to a *reference level*, defined as *the level of where the anthropogenic influence on the ecological system is minimal*.

We believe that this rather dense and philosophical approach will take a very long time to understand fully and develop to a point where it may be implemented.

Different parts of the community seem to have different ideas of what constitutes an ecosystem approach;

- To politicians, and those who have signed the various conventions which promote it, the ecosystem approach is a mindset or philosophy of management, based on holistic principles. Having approved the approach, it is not their task to implement it.
- To the scientists and philosophers whose advice has been sought on its implementation the ecosystem approach is a process, or way of doing things, which involves scientific research, the setting of complex ecosystem targets and the preparation of a set of rules to approach these. It will take time to work out the details.
- To fisheries managers, participants in the fisheries and those with an interest in the protection of the environment, the ecosystem approach is a simple goal which must be achieved.

We have adopted the approach that the 'ecosystem approach' is a simple framework for the management of natural resources. It aims to manage those human activities that have an impact on the environment and its life forms. The approach recognises that humans are a part of the ecosystem and aims to make both economic activities and the environment more sustainable in terms of their capacity to absorb stress without fundamental change. Rather than develop the complex concepts proposed by others, we think it is important to develop a set of simple goals which can readily be achieved through relevant parties working together.

Fishers, living in close contact with the sea, and depending on it as a source of income, are able to take a lead role in the stewardship of marine resources and must be involved in the adoption of an ecosystem approach. There are a

number of examples within the European Union of fishers already collaborating with scientists and others in the implementation of the ecosystem approach. The fishers concerned may not have seen themselves as ecologists, or as setting ecological objectives, or participating in an ecosystem approach but they will have been trying to manage their activities in a sustainable way, without compromising their future, and with minimal impact upon the environment.

We see the implementation of an ecosystem approach as a human problem, rather than a biological one. Fundamental to the approach is the involvement of all those who make a living from the sea and fisheries. The approach is best carried out at a local or regional or even local level, where the boundaries of the ecosystem, and the interested parties, can more readily be defined. Our approach involves the setting of simple, pragmatic goals, and the agreement of management measures to achieve these. The success of the adopted measures must be appraised, and if they have not worked, a new approach must be adopted.