

Swimming away! Arctic fisheries cooperation

Andreas Østhagen, Research Fellow, Fridtjof Nansen Institute, Norway, and University of British Columbia, Canada

In 2008, the European Union (EU) stated that “climate change will fuel existing conflicts over depleting resources, especially where access to those resources is politicised.” Arctic fisheries are a good example. In 2009, Iceland and the Faroe Islands unilaterally decided to increase their annual quotas on mackerel by 6,500% and 340%. Warmer waters had caused the mackerel stock to change its patterns and venture northwards, leading to an advantageous situation for the two island states.

Fisheries are especially prone to small-scale conflicts erupting, as both resources and maritime boundaries are hard to control and monitor. Fish constitutes a mobile and transnational resource of great value. This is particularly the case with migrating fish stocks, often traversing across invisible maritime borders. Fish itself – at least straddling fish stocks – constitutes a ‘global common’, defined as an ‘environmental object’ that cannot be appropriated to any individual group. When states exploit stocks independently of each other to maximise their own immediate short-term benefits, a so-called ‘tragedy of the commons’ takes place and the stocks become subject to depletion. Therefore, dispute and conflict between states over fisheries have been commonplace throughout history.

The Cod Wars (1950s-60s) and the Turbot War (1990s) provide recent historical examples of conflict erupting over straddling fish stocks. Both took place in waters connecting to the Arctic Ocean. The world’s oceans are faced with a new challenge, different from these historical cases. At large, humanity is experiencing a widespread reduction in the total biomass of marine resources, closely linked to human exploitative activities. At the same time, stocks are changing their migratory patterns because of changes in the geophysical marine environment. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the Arctic.

The various Arctic sub-regions are home to some of the most profitable fish stocks in the world. Failure to reach agreements on marine resource management holds relevance for the whole region, with the Barents and Bering Seas historically prone to such disputes. Some have gone so far as to argue that the failure to agree on fisheries quotas was the primary reason for Iceland’s decision to end its EU membership bid on 12th March 2015. Others foresee an increase in the failure of cooperation more generally, as the impact of climate change on fish stocks becomes increasingly apparent. The five Arctic coastal states

(Norway, Denmark (Greenland), Canada, the United States and Russia) have together with other countries agreed on a moratorium on fisheries in the central Arctic Ocean in advance of a conflict.

So why did cooperation over fisheries in the Norwegian Sea fail? As the story goes, Iceland and the Faroe Islands decided to ignore the existing quota-setting for mackerel, claiming – and taking – its right to a piece of the pie, as the stock had entered its waters in 2005. Alternatively, Norway and the EU blocked Iceland from partaking in the multilateral quota-setting, as a deliberate measure to ensure their hegemony within this system and ensuring their relatively large share of the pie.

In any case, cooperation suffered breakdown as the distribution of the resource and the interests of the actors drastically shifted. Consequently, the international cooperation that had developed to avoid a tragedy of the commons scenario failed, and the fish stock in question, in this case mackerel, is arguably being exploited beyond sustainable levels (although there are many diverging views on this). Still, today, there is no solution to this conflict over who-gets-what in the Norwegian Sea.

When the UK leaves the EU on 29th March 2019, it will become another party to the international negotiations over fisheries and quotas. One prevalent argument in both the BREXIT and Scottish independence campaigns has been to ‘take back our waters’. But questions remain how exactly quotas will be distributed and whether other EU countries are willing to give up their quotas in UK waters without also excluding UK fishermen from their own waters.

As fisheries are likely to continue to change in tandem with a changing climate, understanding how countries adapt and can continue to cooperate on shared stocks is of utmost relevance. The initial prediction that climate change will “fuel existing conflicts” over resources needs to be further questioned, as there is more than one dimension to this statement. At the same time, we should not underestimate the importance of fisheries for local communities *and* national pride. As the United Nations launches the Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development (2021-2030), fisheries will continue to figure on international as well as national agendas and may, if left to its own devices, lead to further conflict between countries intent on retaining ‘their waters’.

“Dispute and conflict between states over fisheries have been commonplace throughout history.”