



That's the way of the Small Islands...

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SMALL ISLANDS STRUGGLE FOR THEIR DIGNITY

The European Small Islands Federation is gaining ground. Both in Brussels and amongst other similar organisations fighting for their geographical specificities to be recognized, the attention paid to small islands communities is growing indeed. The CPMR Islands Commission hold on Lewis (Scotland) last week testifies to that.

Small Islands Communities shall take the chance of this renewed optimism and ESIN is determined to take the opportunities that arise.

The « Euro-islands » ESPON project is now launched. Small islands are well represented and will be looked into.

On another level, islands fishermen are coming together to preserve their rights. The struggle was initiated a year ago by John O'Brien, a fisherman from Inis bofin (Ireland), and progressively scattered to other small islands : John was on the island of Houat (France) a couple of week ago to meet the fishermen and exchange on their common issues. John came with Loic Jourdain, film-maker (Man of the Islands, Tory Island, After the Prophecy) who has been following John in his struggle over the last year. Parallely, a forum for fisheries initiated by the Shetland in 1996 keeps on assisting the CPMR in preparing policy positions on fisheries issues on islands.

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Exchange of experience between island fishermen - Isle of Houat - 9th of May



ISLANDS FISHERIES JOINING FORCES FOR THEIR RIGHTS (by Brian O’Riordan - The Secretary, ICSF Belgium Office)

John’s Story

For generations John O’Brien’s family have lived on the island of Inis Bo Finne (Inishbofin), a Gaeltacht Island (Irish speaking area) off the coast of Donegal, Northern Ireland. John too hopes that his sons and their off spring will be able to enjoy the fishing livelihood he and his forebears have enjoyed.

But over the last decade, like many others in remote coastal communities, John’s fortunes have taken a turn for the worse. He is now struggling to make a living in a fishery where alternative options are being closed.

John’s story shows how the implementation of the Common Fisheries Policy (CFP) at Member State level, and the influence of powerful lobby groups can completely undermine the fishing based economies of small island communities, and ruin the livelihoods of fishing families.

Traditional stock conservation mechanisms as practiced by small-scale fisheries in many parts of the world, where different species on different grounds are targeted with different gears at different times of the year, were effectively killed off by the system of Producer Organizations and by the way EU policies were implemented at national level. Multi-species multi-gear fishing has given way to single species single gear fishing, and consequent over supply of markets, reduction of catch per unit effort, and reduced earnings from and viability of fishing.

The current 2009 review process leading to the reform of the CFP in 2012 could provide an opportunity to safeguard fishing based economies in remote communities, and help sustain and defend the livelihoods of fishers and their families, like John’s. In particular the possibility of applying a “differentiated fishing regime to protect small-

scale fleets”, of regulating fishing activities within the 6 and 12 mile zones to favour small-scale, environmentally sustainable, and socially and economically equitable fishing practices could provide important opportunities for fishers like John.


But a prerequisite condition for this to happen is for small island and other small-scale fishery dependent communities to organize themselves and to make their voices heard in a collective way in the public debate. It is also prerequisite that the decision takers heed such voices, and that they are afforded precedence over other more powerful and influential lobby groups. In the case of John, the European Small Island Network, ESIN, could play an important role in this regard.

The Context

Inishbofin is a small island (some 120 hectares or 300 acres), two miles off the North Coast of Donegal, with a population of around 100 islanders, many of whom spend the winter months on the mainland. There is little year round economic activity, and it is reported that very few people spend winter on the island. There is very poor infrastructure, and it was only in 2002 that running water and electricity were supplied to the island.

Inishbofin is one of 15 islands considered as Gaeltacht islands, where Irish is the primary language. The population of these islands is around 1,700 people. These, and another 15 islands are represented through the Irish Islands Federation (Comhdhail Oileain na h'Eireann). In its turn, the Irish Islands Federation forms part of the European Small-Islands Federation (ESIN), linking it with island communities across Europe.

There are many of Ireland’s offshore islands that have supported settlement through the centuries, but it is the Gaelic islands that can show continuous settlement. What makes these communities so different from others in Ireland, and indeed from other Gaelic speaking communities, is the fragility and isolation of life on the islands, and the enforced containment of these



communities by the sea around them and the very limited land suitable for growing food crops.

Traditional island life has been one of semi-subsistence – a focus on self-sufficiency, but supplemented by the periodic sale of goods (fish during the summer) and services (labour, more typically during the long winter period). In this respect the family and/or household unit forms the main economic unit in the island economy. It is not the resources contributed by or available to individual members of a family that defines a unit, but the combined resources of the family or household group; each member of the family provides cash and/or non-cash inputs to the “family business”.

As the islands have taken a fuller part in the cash economy, so the balance between self-sufficiency and cash income has shifted in favour of the latter, and there is now greater reliance on income sourced from off-island work. But locally-based income remains an important part of the island economy and, perhaps more importantly, an essential part of the sociology and continuity of island culture – to lose even this limited degree of self sufficiency is to remove an essential core element of the culture. This has a particular significance in respect of the underpinning of arguments for the retention of islands’-based fishing.

The Fishery

John and his predecessors, like small-scale and artisanal fishers all over the world, have respected the changing seasons and the variations that these impose on the fishery. For two months of the year, during the summer months of June and July, and by far the most important source of family income, was the coastal salmon fishery.

For the autumn and start of the winter months, there was a reasonable lobster fishery, and for the rest of the year there was a mixed finfish fishery, including for herring and mackerel.

However, the fishery for small-pelagic species was reported to have become non-viable for small operators like John with the advent of Producer Organizations and

the much abused system of withdrawal pricing schemes. This effectively meant that fish prices collapsed, and the bulk of catches were either dumped or went for fish meal production.

In 2007 the coastal salmon fishery was closed. According to John, this was due to pressure from the anglers associations, who wanted the fishery to be managed as an inland fishery. Pressure was put on the Irish Government to close the fishery, which it was argued was a mixed stock fishery, and fish being caught off the coast of Inishbofin was destined for various rivers in Ireland, England, Wales and elsewhere. It was also argued that “the balance of national economic interest is overwhelmingly with salmon angling and not salmon netting”.

Salmon fishers like John were offered compensation payments, or buyouts, which if accepted meant that they could never fish for salmon again. John has persistently refused to accept such compensation payments, insisting on his rights to fish. John explained about the 2006 Salmon Commission, about the ban on monofilament nets, and related aspects of events leading up to the ban in 2007.

Once the salmon fishery was closed, the lobster fishery was extended year round, and very soon became non-viable. John was then encouraged to take up crab fishing, where the main market was in France for live crabs. With his existing vessel, the crabs could not be kept alive and in good condition. This fishery requires a vessel (a “crabber”) of at least 12 metres to accommodate a “vivier” system for keeping the crabs alive, where an investment in new vessels cost over one million Euros. John eventually decided to invest in a second hand 12 metre vivier crabber from Scotland, an investment that takes him over the 10-metre threshold at which various EU regulations come into play, severely restricting his flexibility.

John and his family are now struggling to make a living from crab fishing, where they compete for the same market in France with others in Ireland, and in Scotland. The costs of transporting live crabs to France are huge, representing

about 75% of gross earnings. John also has to purchase bait for his pots.

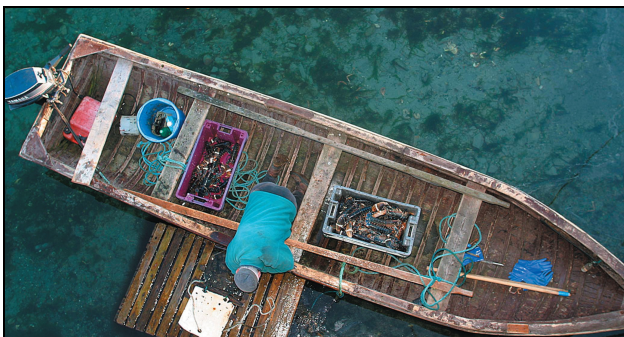
Based as he is in Area 6, a cod recovery zone, he is not even allowed to carry any nets on his boat, or to land line caught fish, because he has no track record of catching cod. This means that he is not allowed to catch his own bait, or even to experiment with other gears for different species that may be commercial.

He finds himself caught in a vicious circle of ever decreasing options.

The way forward

Representatives from small-island and other communities that depend on small-scale fishing need to present their cases with a coherent voice, arguing for a differentiated approach and special treatment to be afforded to them. They need to argue their cases based on the sustainability of their operations (in terms gear selectivity, fuel efficiency, low impact on the environment etc), and equity (bringing economic benefits, employment and food to small island and remote communities).

A case also needs to be made for flexibility on vessel size, where other criteria may be more appropriate for allowing derogations to EU regulations and access within the 12 mile zone, and to species that may be governed by strict regulations.



An Islander tends to his Lobster pots – Comhdail Oileain na hEireann.

EURO-ISLANDS : A REAL PLACE FOR SMALL ISLANDS.

The ESPON project « Euro-Islands » officially started on the 11th of February. On the occasion of this kick-off meeting, a presentation of the methodology was proposed by the transnational working group.

The « Euro-islands » project aims at forming the framework of policies and corresponding regulatory adjustments reflecting in a practical way the common, European consideration on the territorial dimension of cohesion. This will be possible through targeted action, focusing on the territorial handicaps and assets of the European Islands, deriving from “insularity”.

NEWS :

ESIN website now on-line !

On your computers everyone ! ESIN new website is now available on-line at www.europeansmallislands.net. You will find various information, news and links to relevant websites.

The 29th Islands Commission AGM :

The 29th Annual Assembly of the CPMR Islands Commission was held on Lewis, in the Outer Hebrides (Scotland) on the 7 and 8th of May.

The European Small Islands Federation was cordially invited to contribute to the works.

Mr Bengt Almkvist (chairman of ESIN) participated to a round table on the expectations of the various territories with permanent constraints.

On the programme also were discussed the energy/climate change package, the « Euro-islands » ESPON project, Territorial Cohesion, Island Fisheries... More details on the Islands Commission website at :

www.islandscommission.org