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Gunnar Bragi Sveinsson, Minister of Fisheries and Agriculture

Science and political courage

Honorable ministers, ladies and gentlemen

I believe that the issue for discussion here today, is of fundamental importance for the future of our industry: How scientific research can help ensuring sustainable fisheries at peace with Mother Nature.

The oceans and capture fisheries have become symbolic in the way we treat our planet´s wild living resources: How to reconcile our need for large scale food extraction with our need to protect the planet from overexploitation and abuse. To ensure that we do not cause permanent damage to our ecosystems that are the foundations to our very existence. Of course this has been said many times. But now we do have strong scientific evidence to show that our human activities can interfere with the life processes of our Planet and with potentially disastrous consequences. That, of course has always been the key message of the environmental NGO´s which led to the rise of Green Politics as a perfectly logical reaction to the ecological problems facing humanity. That to me seems like common sense.

But as we all know, common sense is not so common and that is where Science comes in - the theme of our discussion today. Actually, Science is the best friend of “Common Sense“. But Science has also been given a more descriptive name, “The Evidence Based Approach“: If we want to find out what seems to be right we gather data and check out the facts as evidence for our reasoning. The bottom line for Science is “show me the data”.

When fisheries were being developed worldwide in the latter part of the 20th century science did not play a central role. Many saw fisheries as a kind of a large scale, self-regulating hunting activity. Pristine waters were commonly fished without any prior research. With weak or non-existing fisheries management a Klondike gold-rush mentality was common. Fishery science was at best seen as an interesting academic exercise while at worst as a potential obstruction to honest straight-forward economic activity.

But we have come a long way in making progress in fishery science and fisheries management, recognizing that these two are strongly linked.

Countries that have practiced systematic fisheries science for decades have a pretty good view of the size of the fish stocks in their waters. They know about the birth rates (or recruitment) for the different fish species as well as their whereabouts during their different life stages, i.e. spawning grounds, juvenile grounds and feeding grounds. We say in Iceland that when you count your wild fish every year, measure their recruitment and growth rates in order to calculate the amounts and sizes you are planning to catch next year, you are much closer to

mariculture than “wild“ fisheries. But of course, nature is complex and pulls her surprises so that caution must be taken to ensure sustainability. That is why most advanced fishing nations do apply a precautionary approach when deciding on fishing quotas.

And then to fisheries management: The system that should ensure that the fishing targets are not exceeded, that the landing statistics are correct – that the rules set for the fisheries are generally followed. Science is the guide to help us find which fisheries management systems are the most effective ones!

Historically, many countries have chosen very weak or ineffective systems to manage their fisheries, mostly based on “input controls” such as limiting the number of fishing days at sea. This results in a race, firstly for the most valuable fish with many negative consequences and secondly by fostering a quantity mentality instead that of quality and value. But this is fast changing in many parts of the world with the introduction of highly self-policing output systems such as Individual Transferable Quotas, ITQ´s.

But environmentalism is making a very significant mark on fisheries science and fisheries management. Classical fishery science has focused on individual target stocks that we want to harvest but the new “ecosystem approach” demands taking the bigger environmental picture into account. A classic issue in that respect is the question on how fisheries are affecting food sources for other dependent animals e.g. seabirds or marine mammals or if particular fishing gears or fishing methods are causing harm to juvenile fish or the seafloor to name but a few examples.

This new approach was embraced by the groundbreaking Rio meeting on sustainable development in 1992. Then the FAO Reykjavik Conference on Responsible Fisheries in the Marine Ecosystem held in 2001 addressed how these ideas could be put in action. The Reykjavik conference showed that "ecosystem based fisheries management" is far more demanding scientifically than the conventional one stock models that fisheries scientists had been dealing with. Moreover, the adopted Reykjavik Declaration stated that the objective of ecosystem considerations were "…to contribute to long term food security…", which of course means that man is part of the ecosystem. Something that obviously is not clear to many.

So where do we stand on these issues?

Firstly, even though wild capture fisheries have been at a constant level globally for some 25 years now, they still represent by far our largest use of wild animal populations for food and feed. Every year we catch globally around 90 million tonnes of "wild" fish. Some 70 million tonnes of wild fish are used for direct human consumption and in addition 67 million tonnes now come from aquaculture. So today wild capture fisheries are providing a little bit more than half of all the fish that we use for human consumption. Soon, we will see wild captured fish represent the minority of fish on the human food table.

Secondly, we have figured out how to measure what overfishing is and how to avoid it. We have come quite far in acting upon the ecosystem approach to fisheries management. In short, even though the science is never finished, we currently have most of the tools to ensure balanced harvesting of the common fish stocks in the North Atlantic Ocean.

The fact is, however, that when we look at what is happening in the North Atlantic we see classical examples of overfishing - actually over many years now - and this overfishing is neither caused by of lack of knowledge nor imperfect science. I guess that an academic might use the term (quote) “political war mongering to get a bigger slice of the cake” (unquote) to describe it.

I am not claiming that my country is totally innocent in this respect; I think that none of the nations involved are. We have all been playing the “blame game” to some extent.

So, what can we do?

In my view we have all been waiting for Science to provide us with all the answers. That, of course is very tempting. That is our excuse for not acting.

We insist on knowing how big all our fish stocks are, where they spawn, where they grow up as juveniles, where they live during their adult life, what and how much they eat and where their food comes from. Nothing simple - nothing easy - to say the least. Then, we charge our scientists with making a Formula on how to divide these stocks in a fair way between us, based on these criteria. Despite the complexity this could undoubtedly be done if we had sufficient knowledge on the life histories of all these stocks. But we don´t.

Moreover, in addition to this scientific exercise we also have the philosophical considerations such as this one: Which is more important, where they are born, where the food they eat comes from or where they are fished? We could argue about that for a long, long time!

And then of course all the issues I mentioned are changing from year to year as we see for example form the changing distribution patterns of important fish stocks like Atlantic mackerel, the fish stock we have argued about for years now.

I am sure that if Mother Nature (in capital letters) was a person at our meetings, she would have a good laugh from time to time. But she would, of course have more reason to be crying at our meetings.

The reason is that Science has been telling us very clearly that collectively we are overfishing most of the shared fish stocks in the North Atlantic. And that we have been doing that for years now. The data on this fact is clear.

All of the questions I mentioned are being worked on by our scientists. However, if we examine these issues with open eyes it should be clear that it will take decades to come with sufficient data to feed into a Formula that will work out the “fair shares” of each fishing nation involved. Notwithstanding the philosophical questions I also mentioned.

I believe that all of the countries around this table have at one time or another, been using different wordings to say something to the effect that this overfishing in the North Atlantic must stop and that they really want to contribute to a solution!

To, me this is the perfect example when there is a need for political courage and vision. I repeat: Political courage and vision.

We do need a solution because the eyes of the world are on us, how the rich counties around the North Atlantic go about acting responsibly and in line with all their international commitments and declarations.

Critics of wild capture fisheries point to historical overfishing around the world and wrongly claim that fisheries in the wild cannot be controlled or managed. Increasingly we see calls for severely limiting or even stopping commercial wild capture fisheries. In the USA a highly restrictive environmental legislation is causing more and more fish stocks there to be underfished. The so called “foregone fisheries” and I repeat “forgone fisheries” which means leaving perfectly good fish to rot in the sea. In Australia the authorities are closing down commercial fisheries and giving the harvesting rights to sports fishers.

In a culturally complex world with clashing interests I believe that we have to lean on science as much as possible to guide us to a fair outcome. Science is the bedrock for nations to resolve their disputes internationally. But in such complex cases as we are faced with here, science can only provide a guide because the problems are not only scientifically complex but include social, economic and political dimensions.

We politicians are routinely faced with making decisions based on insufficient data. Scientists on the other hand must make sure that they do not over interpret what lies in the data. Successful fisheries to me represent this very interesting interaction between these two worlds. We politicians should strive to make policies, based on science. Scientists should strive NOT to make science based on policies or politics.

So, dividing the straddling fish stocks in the North Atlantic is firmly on the tables of us the politicians. We have support from scientific analyses but decisions are largely of a political nature – at least for the time being. That is a reality we cannot escape from.

Let us remember the famous quote by Abba Eban the Israeli foreign minister when addressing the United Nations in 1967 when he said (quote): "... *that men and nations do behave wisely once they have exhausted all other alternatives" (unquote).* (repeat the sentence).

But that was almost 50 years ago and we all know that the Middle East sadly has not yet "exhausted all other alternatives" and keep on their struggles.

We do not have 40 years to squabble over fishing quotas in the North Atlantic. If we continue like we have in the last few years, the fish will be gone and the fishing license might have been taken away from us one way or the other. We should be reminded that public outcry has more power now than ever.

Honorable ministers, ladies and gentlemen.

I believe that we have "exhausted the alternatives" to solve our outstanding fishery disputes in the North Atlantic. It is time for political courage. It is time for vision and good natured political brokering-based on science but not solved by science. Nothing less can expect of us.

Thank you for your kind attention.