



THE SUNDAY TIMES

Editorial; Opinion, Columns

Hold fire — only cunning will win the mackerel war

CHARLES CLOVER

939 words

13 January 2013

The Sunday Times

ST

1; National

25

English

© 2013 Times Newspapers Ltd. All rights reserved

We are entering the fifth year of the "**mackerel** war" that rages in the north Atlantic over the fish that is, for now, Britain's most valuable catch. One of my new year resolutions has been to get to the bottom of who is to blame for this increasingly bitter dispute between Iceland and the Faroes, on one side, and Norway and the [European Union](#) on the other and to understand why this story has come to this sad pass. And I think I have.

It is sad because this year, again, real damage is likely to be done to stocks of a fish that only last year was being handed out in baps by the television chef Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall as a sustainable alternative to overfished cod. Catches of **mackerel** are estimated to have reached well over 900,000 tons last year, against scientific advice of about 500,000 tons. This cannot go on.

Northeast Atlantic **mackerel** are still numerous, but so was the population of **mackerel** that used to breed in the North Sea. In 1967 about 1m tons of North Sea **mackerel** were caught. Then the population collapsed. It is now only 1% of its former level. That is the cautionary tale.

This is the year that the "phoney war" over the unilateral decision by Iceland and the Faroes to take 145,000 tons a year of **mackerel** each, in defiance of the historic quota of other countries, may become a "hot war" of trade sanctions against Icelandic and Faroese fish. Last Monday Richard Benyon, the fisheries minister, popped up in the Commons to say EU sanctions against Iceland and the Faroes were "on the table".

Sanctions against imports of **mackerel** and fishmeal for salmon farms are the most likely — although Europe's bureaucrats and ministers need to wake up and rush through a regulation in time. If they are quick, sanctions would be triggered in July, when the **mackerel** shoals range northwards and Iceland and the Faroes set their unilateral quotas. Benyon said **mackerel** — landings of which are worth £205m a year to Britain — remains the government's "absolute priority" and he is determined to do all he can to get Iceland and the Faroes back to the negotiating table.

My fear is that sanctions, or the threat of them, will have the effect that Europe least wants. Cash-strapped Iceland has decided it has a perfect right to take so many fish. It clearly has a right to some, for as a result of global warming or some other factor there are now **mackerel** in its waters where there was none a few decades ago. Worryingly, Iceland has not been deterred by the suspension of eco-labels from the Marine Stewardship Council saying **mackerel** is sustainably fished. Only Europe's retailers care about that. Iceland's other markets in Russia and the Far East do not give a fig. They could easily take up the slack.

We should resist the temptation to get jingoistic about Iceland's and the Faroes' determination to harvest more than their fair share of the **mackerel**, however, for we are in danger of repeating the mistakes of the 1976 cod war. Making Iceland more determined to go its own way will hurt Britain because sanctions will hit Grimsby, where 4,000 jobs depend on processing fish, much of it landed by Icelandic and Faroese fishermen.

I have a plan for Benyon. It depends on a little-known international organisation that since 1959 has been responsible for managing vast areas of the ocean beyond territorial waters. It is called the [North East Atlantic Fisheries Commission](#). It is based at 22 Berners Street, London.

You will discover if you fish around on the commission's website that it has a fast-track dispute resolution procedure that could be invoked at any time by any of its contracting parties — the EU, Denmark for the Faroes, Iceland, Norway and Russia. Strangely enough it has never been employed, either in the case of the **mackerel** or, I am told, in the case of other species such as the redfish, the blue whiting and the Atlanto-Scandic herring, all of which are being fished in excess of scientific advice because the commission's members cannot agree a quota.

Could this, in the **mackerel**'s case, be because the commission is not an impartial friend of the fish? I do not know. What I am told is that the commission has become a gentlemen's club of unaccountable bureaucrats who never make a difficult decision if it can be left until their next expenses-paid trip to London.

Benyon and his ally Maria Damanaki, the European commissioner, should swallow their pride, call Iceland's bluff and persuade the EU to submit itself to the commission's dispute resolution process — in front of a judge. Then accept the outcome. In doing so they would be showing real leadership, for the world's regional fisheries management organisations, such as the sleepy Berners Street outfit, are being found wanting and need to up their game. This one is based here, so we can give it an ultimatum: do your job properly or get out.

If it does a biased job of dividing up the **mackerel** quota, or Iceland refuses to abide by its authority, we should persuade the EU to stop its money or decide unilaterally to seal up the commission's doors for good. Suddenly it sounds a much more cheerful new year.

'MAKING ICELAND DETERMINED TO GO ITS OWN WAY WILL HURT BRITAIN'

News International Associated Services Limited