The CFP and the eco-system approach to fisheries management

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PURPOSE: to set out the role of fisheries management in implementing an ecosystem approach to marine management.

BACKGROUND: the main impact of fisheries on the marine ecosystem is the killing of marine animals. Fisheries may also impact habitats when fishing gear is in contact with the bottom and thus affecting the bottom substrate and organisms living in or on the bottom. The fishing pressure on four fifths of European fish stocks is currently above sustainable targets. Article 6 of the consolidated version of the Treaty establishing the European Community calls for an obligation to integrate environmental protection requirements into the Community policies such as the Common Fisheries Policy (CFP). The Council Regulation on the conservation and sustainable exploitation of fisheries resources under the CFPstates that one of the operational objectives of the CFP is the progressive implementation of an ecosystem approach to fisheries management. An ecosystem approach is also included as an overarching objective in various international agreements that Member States have signed, such as the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) and the declaration of the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) held in Johannesburg in 2002.

An ecosystem approach to managing the seas cannot and should not be implemented in a specific sector alone, but must be cross-sectoral. The Integrated Maritime Policyconstitutes the overall framework for integrated action in the maritime field, and its environmental pillar, the Marine Strategy Framework Directive, constitutes the general basis for implementing an ecosystem approach to the marine environment. The Habitats Directive, with its requirement to establish networks of protected areas in the marine domain, provides some important tools for an ecosystem approach. Various initiatives that contribute to that objective have already been taken under the CFP, but have not been seen as part of an overall strategy for implementation. The Commission will continue to develop measures to reduce or eliminate the ecological impact of fisheries whenever new knowledge of such impacts becomes available. The main instruments to act on the overall fishing pressure are long-term management plans building on the WSSD requirement to rebuild fish stocks to 'maximum sustainable yield' (MSY) levels. The reduction of fishing pressure to MSY levels is supplemented by a policy to reduce and eventually eliminate unwanted by-catch (the discards policy). This will be implemented gradually on a fisheries-by-fisheries basis through the new discards policy.

CONTENT: the present communication forms part of the **first wave of actions to be implemented under the new integrated Maritime Policy.**

The key objectives are to minimise the impacts of fishing on the wider marine environment by reducing the overall level of fishing pressure, and to ensure that fisheries measures are used fully to support the **cross-sectoral approach** defined by the EU's Marine Strategy and Habitats Directives. This should ensure protection for vulnerable habitats and sensitive species, prevent disruptions to the food chain, safeguard the integrity of key ecosystem processes, and thus create a healthy marine environment which will positively support a thriving fishing industry, alongside other sustainable human activities.

Specific objectives need to be defined regarding ecosystem services (i.e. the social and economic benefits from fisheries) and meaningful ecological boundaries for fisheries impacts (i.e. keeping populations within viable levels, maintaining biological diversity and keeping impacts on the structure, processes and functions of the ecosystem at acceptable levels).

The **task** of fisheries management within an ecosystem approach in a EU context is thus to:

1. keep direct and indirect impacts of fisheries on marine ecosystems within bounds in relation to healthy marine ecosystems and ecologically viable fish populations by including all existing knowledge about the interactions between fisheries and marine ecosystems in decisions under the CFP;
2. ensure that actions taken in fisheries are consistent with and supportive of actions taken under the cross-sectoral Marine Strategy and Habitats Directive.

The integrated approach through the Maritime Policy and its environmental pillar, the Marine Strategy, will fully benefit sustainable fisheries by ensuring integrative management of all human, environmental and economic interactions in the maritime field. The benefits to fisheries of an ecosystem approach to marine management are extensive. Fishing is probably the one maritime sector which is most directly dependent on healthy marine ecosystems, and is thus also the sector which gains most from integrated protection of these ecosystems. An ecosystem approach to marine management will address the concerns, often voiced by the fishing industry, that many human activities impact the marine ecosystems and the fish stocks in them negatively and that all these impacts - not just fisheries - need to be managed in order to protect the marine ecosystems and fish stocks. An integrated ecosystem approach will do what fisheries management cannot do alone: ensure that marine ecosystems recover to and are maintained in a healthy state whereby the basis for the future productivity of fish stocks is secured.

The Commission calls for the **protection of sensitive marine habitats and sensitive species**.

Lastly, the CFP will support policies aimed at an ecosystem approach to marine management:

- in the short and medium term steps to reduce overall fishing pressure on marine ecosystems will continue, including implementation of the MSY approach through longterm management plans and in annual or multiannual proposals on catch limitations;
- legislation will be developed to reduce unwanted by-catches through the discard policy and technical measures will be revised to include considerations of habitats damage and by-catch;
- for specific groups of sensitive species plans of action are being developed where a toolbox of instruments is used to provide specific protection. A plan of action to protect sharks and elasmobranchs will be published in 2008 and a plan of action to protect seabirds will be published in 2009;
- simplified technical measures through the new regulation proposed in 2008 will trigger improvements in the selectivity of fishing gear;
- the condition of fish populations will be an element in determining good environmental status under the Marine Strategy, and CFP instruments will be implemented to achieve the goals relating to fish populations and impacts of fisheries on habitats and sensitive species;
- a first set of selected indicators will serve as a practical basis for fisheries managers in the implementation of an ecosystem approach. This will be further developed and completed and the supporting data will be collected under the revised Data Collection Regulation to come into force from 2009;
- CFP instruments will be used to ensure appropriate management of fishing activities within areas protected by Community legislation (e.g. Natura 2000 sites, or other protected areas including under the Marine Strategy Framework Directive);
- the Community will support initiatives to promote an ecosystem approach in RFMOs, in the UN framework and other international fora and, where appropriate, in bilateral agreements;
- an ecosystem approach will furthermore be seen as the guiding principle for decisions under the CFP where an incremental approach will be taken to address issues of excessive fishing pressure on populations and ecosystems, minimising impacts on sensitive habitats and species and preventing distortions of ecosystem structure and functioning;

- research on the ecosystem approach will remain a priority in the FP 7 programme and research activities on all its aspects will continue to be promoted in order to improve knowledge and fill gaps in the description of marine ecosystems, thus feeding into the adaptive process of its implementation. Furthermore, scientists and managers need to intensify their dialogue so that the management tools can be improved continuously;
- Member States are invited to use the funding possibilities of the EFF in order to achieve progress in the implementation of an ecosystem approach by promoting measures such as the improvement of knowledge and fisheries management, training of fishers in low impact fishing practices, and development of practices and technologies with low impact on the environment.

The Commission will continue to develop such measures to reduce or eliminate the ecological impact of fisheries whenever new knowledge of such impacts becomes available. The Commission has to this end requested the ICES and the STECF to provide advice on any new knowledge on the interaction between fisheries and the ecosystem. Collection of data to derive indicators on the ecosystem effects of fisheries will be included in Member 'States' data collection programmes as from 2009.