

Time for a Cod Peace

THE cod war took a turn for the worse last week with a British trawler being holed by fire from an Icelandic gun boat. Relations between Britain and Iceland are now strained to their utmost and it is clear that the sooner negotiations are resumed between the two countries the better it will be for both governments and fishermen. In the circumstances it is unfair for Iceland to insist that the British navy departs before talks restart.

The issues are clear enough at this stage and Iceland's demand to control the fishing within fifty miles of its own coast is mostly a means to ensure, as best it can, the future economic growth of the country. It is agreed that the cod in Icelandic waters is fully exploited and for Iceland itself to obtain greater benefit from the seas nearest to its shores, other countries must restrict their catches in these waters.

The British fishermen see this as yet another attempt to deprive them of good fishing grounds. About a third of all the cod brought into British ports in 1971 was obtained from the waters around Iceland and in contrast to other areas in the North Atlantic where cod is traditionally found—such as the North East Arctic region—the waters are not at present over fished. There is little hope of obtaining cod further than fifty miles from Iceland for most of the cod is found on the hundred fathom deep continental shelf within the fifty mile limit.

Cod fishing in the north Atlantic is controlled by two commissions, the International Commission for North West Atlantic Fisheries and the North East Atlantic Fisheries Commission. Britain and Iceland are members of both bodies. Part of the present troubles stems from the decision of the North West Commission to limit the catch in the waters under its control, not by the traditional method of altering the size of the fishing net mesh but by imposing a limit on the catch. These controls only affect the fishing off the west coast of North America at present. These controls were introduced at the beginning of 1973 but the efforts of the North East Commission to introduce similar restrictions have been thwarted by no other country than Iceland which only two weeks ago refused to accept a similar agreement drawn up by the North East Atlantic Fisheries Commission.

These developments, coupled with the introduction in recent years of factory ships—that is trawlers with refrigerated storage—have convinced the Icelandic Government that the waters near its own shores would be the first to be put under pressure if tight limits were imposed in the North East Atlantic, in particular the seas to the north of Norway and to the south of Spitsbergen and the Barents Sea, which have been over fished.

But is the cod in danger of being fished to extinction in the North Atlantic? Clearly the cod is not threatened to the same extent as the whale for example. Whales reproduce once or twice every one or two years but a large cod could lay several million eggs during its lifetime. There is a need for only two of these eggs to reach maturity to ensure that the stock is replaced. The size of the mesh now used by cod fishermen—130 millimetres—ensures that no cod is caught until it is at least two years old and the rate

of fishing is such that it is estimated that about fifteen per cent of two year old cod will survive for seven years, the age of full maturity. But, it must be said, there is a fine line between fishing enough to ensure that the stock is replaced and fishing to ensure that the stock will not become depleted. At present the North West Commission is advised by scientists as to the amount of fishing that can be done and the commission then divides this up among the representative countries according to the amounts of cod which they landed during previous years. What is at once clear is that the anomalous situation with only one of the fishing commissions setting limits on catches will impose a great deal of pressure on the fishing grounds under the aegis of the other commission and, whatever happens about Iceland's claims, the two commissions should, at least, present a common policy on catches. In particular setting a limit on the cod that can be caught in the Arctic regions north of Norway will ensure that these grounds will recover properly and will not be over fished again during the recovery period.

But how will this help settle the dispute over fishing within fifty miles of Iceland's shores? The Icelandic waters are, by mutual agreement, fished as much as is wise already. Setting quotas on the fish taken from these waters will not necessarily alter the total catch. More evidence is needed soon to decide whether Icelandic waters are being overfished or not.

It must be faced that Iceland badly wants to improve its economy. Fishing is the country's chief industry and an improvement in this sector can only be obtained by an increased catch which, without seriously damaging the stock, can only be achieved at the expense of another country's catch. Can a way now be found over the negotiating table to aid Iceland without seriously damaging the livelihood of the British trawlermen?

100 Years Ago



PROFESSOR WYMAN has concluded, as the result of explorations among the shell mounds of Florida, U.S., during the past winter, that the aborigines by whom they were constructed must have been decided cannibals, as in eight different instances he has found considerable quantities of human bones in the shell heaps, the bones themselves being broken up and split, just as in the case of the bones of other animals. This, he is satisfied, was not the result of burial, but was done for the purpose of obtaining the marrow, probably after the flesh had been devoured.

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