Behind any cod peace

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FISH, as all admirers of the late P. G. Wodehouse's Bertie Wooster well know, is a food which nourishes the brain. Before he tackled any particularly taxing problem, Jeeves was urged to consume a dish of cod. It is to be hoped that all those trying to solve the problems of fishing in Iceland's territorial waters will keep their mental faculties in tip-top order by themselves eating some of the fish which are the cause of the trouble!

The problem is one of marine conservation. Catches of cod and other fish off the coast of Iceland have been falling and biologists believe that unless the tonnage caught is substantially reduced, the industry will suffer permanent damage. This would be a major disaster to Iceland. As far as Britain is concerned, the livelihood of a proportion of our 17,000 fishermen, and of the east coast ports from which they operate, would be affected, but our national economy is hardly at stake. Nevertheless we would clearly benefit if we could continue to share in a sustainable yield, and we could make long term plans accordingly.

The importance of fish in our diet has often been overestimated. When there was a general belief in a global "protein gap" there was a hope that the oceans would make a substantial contribution to offset shortages of essential elements from crops and animals grown on dry land. The high levels of first class proteins in fish made them particularly valuable in this connection. A great deal of research has been done to try to maintain and increase fish stocks, and to develop fish farming in both marine and freshwater habitats.

Nevertheless, in most western countries, fish consumption has steadily decreased. During the nineteen thirties people in Britain ate on an average

some 30 pounds of fish annually, and it is reckoned that over 70 per cent of white fish went to fish and chip shops to provide a cheap and nutritious meal for the poorer sections of the population. Today we only eat about 12 pounds a year—some four ounces a week. Fish and chip shops have disappeared from many towns, or deal mainly in other foods. Many towns no longer support a "real" wet fish shop. The main source of fish for most of our population is the frozen food cabinet in the supermarket and the most popular dish the fish finger (which, incidentally, may have a higher content of batter and other extraneous matter than of actual fish).

The situation that now exists is that, except in a few communities in maritime areas, fish is of little dietary importance. It does indeed contain first class protein, but few people would be deficient without it. The contribution to the calorific intake even in those areas where most is eaten is almost negligible, for weight for weight cod has a lower energy value than almost any other widely consumed food. From the point of view of diet the vitamin D in the fish liver may be important, for a shortage of this substance appears to be increasing particularly in children of Asiatic origin coming from sunnier countries where the vitamin was synthesised in their skin. Each year the medical literature reports an increasing number of cases of rickets.

Sea fish and its waste also contributes to pet foods, to animal feeding stuffs and to fish manure. But the largest amounts of fish products used

in this way include such substances as the Peruvian anchovy, rather than the catches of our British-based fleet.

Notwithstanding the comparative unimportance of fish to our nutrition, the industry is an important one, and this should be the basis of negotiations with the Icelandic government, and of international discussions shortly to take place on the Law of the Sea and of the rights of maritime and fishing nations in the water off their coasts. It is to be hoped that "red herrings" such as the protein levels in the diets of Western nations will not be allowed to obscure the issues. Eating fish gives pleasure to many, and makes their diet less monotonous. Our fishermen have hard and dangerous lives, and deserve to be adequately rewarded. Research has taught us a lot about population dynamics and about how fish stocks can be conserved, though some of the recent changes in numbers and distribution—for instance the disappearance of herring from many traditional fishing grounds—are not fully understood.

It looks as if considerable restraint in fishing will be needed in breeding areas such as that around Iceland, and that increased catches of species which the housewife presently finds unacceptable may be needed if consumption is not to fall even further. Fish farming in sea lochs and freshwater will no doubt increase, but it is unlikely that fish will ever form more than a tiny fraction of the world's food supply. The growing world population will need to be fed on the increased productivity of terrestrial rather than of marine crops and animals.

As for the worry about the energy used in modern farming, where the crop produces fewer calories than are expended in producing it, this applies even more to fisheries. The fishermen themselves consume about a quarter of the calories of their catch, their boats use many times as much energy, and this total is further increased when that needed to build the ships and manufacture the fishing gear is included.

● Mr Jens Evensen, Norway's minister for matters relating to the law of the sea, has suggested a law empowering the Norwegian Government to introduce a 200-mile economic zone off the country's coasts. The suggestion, which came in a report being debated this week by the Norwegian parliament, is designed to prepare in advance the legislation that would be necessary when a solution is found to the problem of extending Norway's fishing limits. It allows for the introduction of the wider non-trawling zone gradually, and also for narrower limits that relate to types of catches and gear at different times of the year. □

Cartoon: Mahood, Financial Times

"For us it could be
'Peace in Our Time' "