Analysis

Norway and Russia in the Barents Sea – Cooperation and Conflict in Fisheries Management

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Abstract

The Barents Sea fisheries are managed bilaterally by Norway and Russia. The Joint Norwegian–Russian Fisheries Commission sets quotas for the most important fish stocks in the area which are allocated according to a standard formula. The collaboration between the two countries generally functions well, but has since the late 1990s been plagued by disparity between scientific recommendations and established quotas, and Norwegian claims of Russian overfishing.

Establishing an Institutional Framework

The Barents Sea comprises those parts of the Arctic Ocean that lie between the Norwegian mainland, the Svalbard archipelago and the Russian archipelagos Novaya Zemlya and Franz Josef Land. Traditionally, the fish and marine mammals of the Barents Sea have provided the basis for settlement along its shores, particularly in Northern Norway and in the Arkhangelsk region of Russia. Since the Russian Revolution in 1917, the city of Murmansk on the Kola Peninsula has functioned as the nerve center of the Russian "northern fishery basin," second only in importance in the country to its "far eastern fishery basin." The commercially most important fish stock in the Barents Sea is the Northeast Arctic cod, by far the largest of the approximately 30 cod stocks in the North Atlantic.

The United Nations Conference on the Law of the Sea (1975–82) led to a transition from multilateral negotiations for the Barents Sea fisheries under the auspices of the Northeast Atlantic Fisheries Commission (NEAFC) to bilateral negotiations between coastal states with sovereign rights to fish stocks. Norway and the Soviet Union entered into several bilateral fishery co-operation agreements in the mid-1970s. The Norwegian–Russian management regime for the Barents Sea fish stocks defines objectives and practices for co-operative management between the two states within the fields of research, regulation and compliance control.

The co-operation between Russian/Soviet and Norwegian scientists in the mapping of the Barents Sea fish resources dates back to the 1950s. It is now institutionalized under the framework of the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea (ICES). Quota settlement and technical regulation of fisheries are taken care of by the Joint Norwegian– (Soviet/)Russian Fisheries Commission, which has met annually since 1976. The Commission includes members of the two countries' fishery authorities, ministries of foreign affairs, marine scientists and representatives of fishers' organizations. Most importantly, it sets total allowable catches (TACs) for the three fish stocks that are defined as joint stocks of the two countries: cod, haddock and capelin. Cod and haddock are shared on a 50–50 basis, while the capelin quota is shared 60–40 in Norway's favor. Finally, cooperation in compliance control was initiated in 1993, after the Norwegian Coast Guard had revealed considerable Russian overfishing following Russian vessels' new practice of delivering most of their catch to Norwegian ports instead of Murmansk. This collaboration includes the exchange of catch data and inspectors, as well as the harmonization of various enforcement routines.

Evolving Cooperation

Three main periods can be distinguished in the thirty years since the bilateral management regime came into force: before and after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and after the turn of the millennium. The two first periods are treated briefly in the following analysis, with more attention given to the most urgent issues of recent years: overfishing and the disparity between scientific recommendations and TACs.

Until the early 1990s, discussions in the Joint Norwegian–Soviet Fisheries Commission mainly centered on the size of the TACs and whether the smallest permitted mesh size and the minimum length of fish should be increased. As the Soviet northern fishing fleet was mostly engaged in distant-water fisheries (mainly outside Western Africa and South America) and hence not so dependent on the nearby fishing grounds of the Barents Sea, the Soviet party to the Commission generally opted for the lower TAC recommendations given by ICES, while the Norwegian party in most years pressed quotas upwards. Norway, on the other hand, wanted to increase the lowest per-

mitted size of fish and net mesh, but failed to persuade the Soviets to introduce this regulatory measure. The fish are generally smaller in the Soviet/Russian part of the Barents Sea, which explains the Soviet/Russian unwillingness to increase the mesh size.

The 1990s were characterized by the extensive coordination of technical management measures (e.g. the joint introduction of satellite tracking and of selection grids in trawls) and general agreement about the annual TAC levels. The Russians had now become more interested in the valuable cod stock – in Soviet times, they had been more concerned with quantities than global-market prices – and were more dependent on the Barents Sea fisheries as distant-waters fishing was discontinued in the post-Soviet period. But the Northeast Arctic cod stock was very healthy throughout the 1990s, so TACs could be set at comfortable levels without setting ICES's scientific recommendations aside. New problems emerged – both from a biological and an institutional point of view – when the cod stock began to reach crisis levels around the turn of the millennium.

Conflict Over Shrinking Cod Stocks

Cod stock decline in the late 1990s coincided with the recognition internationally of the precautionary principle that a lack of scientific certainty should not be used to postpone management measures that could prevent fisheries degradation. Both the ICES and the Joint Norwegian–Russian Fisheries Commission adopted this principle. The marine scientists recommended drastic reductions in the Barents Sea cod quota, but the Commission annually established quotas far above these recommendations. The Russian party to the Commission strongly opposed the need for implementing quota reductions. The Norwegian party generally supported the scientific recommendations, although opinions varied within the Norwegian fishing industry.

While the Norwegians debated whether the established TACs were sustainable or not, the Russians seemed to view the issue as a battle between the two states, or between Russia and the West. Both the Russian media and the Russian members of the Joint Norwegian–Russian Fisheries Commission accused Norway of having ulterior motives for supporting lower TACs, such as maintaining high world-market prices for cod at a time when the country was starting artificial breeding of this species. Norway largely gave in to Russian demands to keep quotas high since the alternative – no TAC agreement at all, and the effective dismantlement of the bilateral management regime – was far less attractive.

In 2001, the parties for the first time agreed on a three-year quota. This longer time horizon gave them some breathing space and a buffer against sudden developments. Two years later, the Commission devised a fresh set of decision and action rules for management of its side of the Northeast Arctic cod stock, aimed at ensuring biological viability and greater economic predictability for fishery-dependent communities in Norway and Russia. These action rules included:

- average fish mortality should be kept below the precautionary limit over three-year periods;
- TAC should not change more than 10 percent from one year to the next; but
- exceptions can be made in situations where the spawning stock has fallen below defined critical levels.

Russian Overfishing

Russian overfishing after the break-up of the Soviet enforcement system was presumably brought to a halt by the measures introduced under the enforcement cooperation scheme between Norway and Russia in 1993. However, while the exchange of catch and landing data between the two countries might be a necessary factor in eliminating catch underreporting, it is hardly sufficient to prevent abuses. Sanctioning mechanisms in Russia, and the sincerity of Russian officials' wish to eliminate overfishing are uncertain elements in this respect. Further, catches were delivered to transport vessels at sea from the late 1990s, as they were in Soviet days. While fresh fish in the intervening period was brought to Norwegian ports, fishing vessels now handed the fish over to transport vessels as frozen products, for delivery to Denmark, the Netherlands, UK, Portugal, Spain, and other European countries. As a result, the catch data exchange system of Norwegian and Russian enforcement authorities was no longer of much use.

Two specific questions emerged: how much fish was being transferred from vessel to vessel in the Barents Sea, and how much of this product was being delivered to third countries. Seen from the point of view of Norwegian fisheries management authorities, the Russians have not been particularly eager to help in addressing either issue.

Around 2002–3, the Norwegian Directorate of Fisheries increased its efforts to estimate actual Russian catches in the Barents Sea. Based on the results, ICES estimated unreported catches of Northeast Arctic cod as follows: 90,000 tons in 2002, 115,000 tons in 2003, 117,000 tons in 2004 and 166,000 tons in 2005. These figures imply an annual overfishing in the range of 25–40 percent of the TAC during the

period. In other words, the Russians have, according to ICES, overfished their national quotas of Northeast Arctic cod (which are approximately 50 percent of the TAC) by some 50–80 percent annually.

The Russian fisheries management authorities did not accept Norwegian assertions that the problem was so severe. In autumn 2006, they admitted not knowing how much fish is actually transferred at sea and delivered to third countries, but estimated Russian overfishing to be around 20,000–30,000 tons annually in recent years.

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Further reading:

- Hønneland, Geir (2004), "Fish Discourse: Norway, Russia and the Northeast Arctic Cod," *Human Organization* 63(1): 68–77.
- Hønneland, Geir (2005), "Fisheries Management in Post-Soviet Russia: Legislation, Principles and Structure", *Ocean Development & International Law* 36(2): 179–194.

Table: Scientific Recommendations, Established TACs and Reported Catches of Northeast Arctic Cod during the Period 1990–2006

Year	Primary recommendation (ICES)	Established TAC	Reported catches*
1990	172,000	160,000	212,000
1991	215,000	215,000	319,000
1992	257,000	356,000	513,000
1993	385,000	500,000	582,000
1994	649,000	700,000	771,000
1995	682,000	700,000	740,000
1996	746,000	700,000	732,000
1997	787,000	850,000	762,000
1998	514,000	654,000	593,000
1999	360,000	480,000	485,000
2000	110,000	390,000	415,000
2001	263,000	395,000	426,000
2002	182,000	395,000	535,000
2003	305,000	395,000	552,000
2004	398,000	486,000	606,000
2005	485,000	485,000	641,000
2006	471,000	471,000	-

**) Including estimated unreported catches of 25,000 tons in 1990, 50,000 tons in 1991, 130,000 tons in 1992, 50,000 tons in 1993, 25,000 tons in 1994, 90,000 tons in 2002, 115,000 tons in 2003, 117,000 tons in 2004 and 166,000 tons in 2005.*

Sources: Recommendations: ACFM/ICES reports for the year in question; TACs: protocols from sessions in the Joint Norwegian–Russian Fisheries Commission for the year in question; catches: ICES AFWG Report 2006, Copenhagen: International Council for the Exploration of the Sea, 2006.