

Fading Resource / Overfishing Feeds a Crisis

A Spanish Town's Livelihood Dies

By Otto Pohl

International Herald Tribune

BARBATE, Spain — Vincente Virue wanted to be a fisherman so badly that he used his older brother's ID to start working on a ship when he was 12, two years younger than the legal minimum age.

"I was always drawn to the ocean," he said, describing the opportunities and lively activity in this southern Spanish fishing port. "I especially looked forward to the Sardine Fest every July, where we ate the best grilled summer sardines and everyone danced flamenco on the beach."

Those are little more than memories now. With no fish left to catch, the port of Barbate is filled with tarp-wrapped boats and rusting anchors. The Sardine Fest still takes place, but it is not the same — the sardines are imported.

Mr. Virue, now 56, has not had any real work in 18 months and does not expect any soon. "There is no future for us in the water anymore," he said.

All across Western Europe the fishing industry is facing the same threats that have brought Barbate to a standstill. Overfishing has caused fish populations — and catches — to plummet.

The UN Food and Agriculture Organization estimates that 70 percent of all fish stocks globally are either overfished or in danger of it. In northern European waters, previously abundant hake and cod came so close to commercial extinction last December that an emergency ban on fishing was imposed by the European Union.

In March, the EU agency responsible for shaping European fishing policy, the Directorate General for Fisheries, issued a report on the state of the industry that was intended to spark debate about the first full-scale reform of fishing policy in 20 years.

The report is blunt. "If it is to survive" the report warns, "the Community fisheries sector will have to be significantly smaller than it is today." Just reducing the domestic fleets might not be enough. More countries are in a hurry to build up their fishing fleets to make money while they still can.

For Barbate, the final blow came when Morocco chose not to renew an agreement that had allowed Spanish and EU ships to fish in Moroccan waters. Overnight, a total of 4,000 Spanish fishermen in a string of towns along the southern Spanish coast — including most of Barbate's 1,200 fishermen — were out of work.

The death of the fishing industry in Barbate, a town of 22,000 people, did not happen overnight. It expired over four decades, squeezed by diminishing fish stocks and by reduced access to

Moroccan waters. During that time virtually nothing was done to diversify the local economy. When the Moroccans refused to renew the last agreement, which went into effect in 1995 and expired at the end of 1999, people in Barbate had little else to do but cast blame and collect unemployment.

Even then, many refused to believe that the times really had changed. Ship owners even invested their unemployment support payments into building new ships so they would be ready when another accord was signed. It never was.

That kind of inertia has been seen across the European Union. "The decision makers have taken a head-in-the-sand approach," said Scott Burns, the Director of the World Wildlife Fund's Endangered Seas Campaign. "The EU has had a policy blind to biological realities that they simply have not had the political will to confront."

Some of that political will might be found this year as the fisheries policy comes under scrutiny. The EU report has clearly laid out the problems facing Europe. The EU fisheries policy "has not delivered sustainable exploitation of fisheries resources," the report states. "If current trends continue, many stocks will collapse."

Both the report and industry analysts agree that the fundamental problem facing the industry is fleet overcapacity. With an estimated 40 percent more fishing capacity than the oceans can sustain, tremendous pressure has been exerted on the fish stocks.

The result has been, according to Mr. Burns, "a systematic depletion of the more valuable species that causes a continual hunt for new species to exploit," leading to what is called serial overfishing.

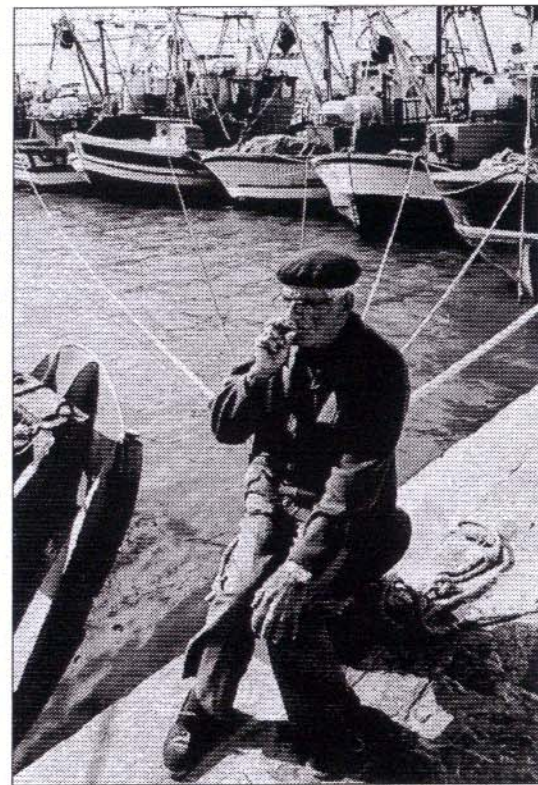
Critics contend that the EU has simply been postponing downsizing its fleet by moving the excess boats to third country fishing grounds. Now that the Moroccan agreement, the biggest fishing agreement the EU had signed, is dead, that safety valve has become a lot less effective.

The tradition of subsidizing the fishing industry has also led to continued expansion and modernization of the fleet.

Part of the estimated €1.1 billion (\$935 million) of annual EU fish subsidies is intended to encourage decommissioning or scrapping of vessels, but most of the money helps artificially maintain a large fleet through price supports, loan guarantees or explicit payment for fleet modernization.

Further exacerbating the problem are advances in technology, which allow boats to go further, faster and find fish with greater accuracy. Sonar and radar technology, much of it first developed for military uses, maps the ocean floor and finds the fish. Then the latest generations of nets make quick work of enormous schools of fish.

The report assigns much of the blame to politicians for not heeding the commission's previous recommendations. "The current situation of resource depletion results, to a good extent, from setting annual catch limits in excess of those proposed by the



Jairo Munoz/The Associated Press



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Vincente Virue, above, now out of work, misses the good old days. At right, the fishing fleet filled the port of Barbate during happier times.

commission on the basis of scientific advice," the report says.

The limited fleet reductions negotiated in the past, according to the report, were made irrelevant by fresh subsidies for fleet expansion and modernization.

Industry critics say they are frustrated by the fact that the authorities are ignoring a clear course of action that is in everyone's long-term interests. With a fleet in balance with what the oceans can sustain, fishermen could catch more fish with less effort. That would leave a healthy ecosystem, as well as a greater return for investors. "The problem," Mr. Burns said, "is that until there are clear rules that everyone believes everyone else is going to follow, it is in everyone's short-term interest to grab as much as possible."

The result of that can be seen in the silent port of Barbate, where on a recent afternoon the only boat at work was a coast guard vessel looking for illegal Moroccan immigrants from Africa.

"Maybe it's a good thing that the economy of Barbate has hit bottom," said Vincent Virue. "Now everyone will stop focusing on the sea, and start looking at developing the coast."

Another unemployed fisherman, Pepe Rivera, agreed. Describing all of the opportunities that lay ahead if Barbate were to take advantage of its sunny climate and wide beaches to attract tourist investment, he concluded: "It's actually too bad that the agreement was renewed in 1995. It allowed everyone to put everything off. If it hadn't been signed, this place could be doing great now."