

FISHING FOR A FUTURE by Arthur Reynolds

The Skipper recently invited Arthur Reynolds, Founder of the Irish Skipper in 1964 to give us his views on where the industry in Ireland has come from since he started observing it and where he thinks the future lies. Here are his observations.

While it can not be said that the past 50 years have been an easy period for Ireland's fish industry it can be stated that progress has been made through the determination of our fishermen.

But for the next 50 years new changes in development policy will be needed to keep Ireland involved in world wide trends related to all food requirements. In some ways we will see that mistakes have not been recognized early enough in the past.

Take salmon farming for instance. The notion that we can produce fish probably in farms set up in exposed sites is false. The cost of stronger cages, heavier anchoring gear and bigger service vessels would not justify returns from such a global competitive business in which our feed prices are higher than in other countries.

Chile, one of the world's biggest producers with very low feed costs is running down it's salmon farms, including those owned by Marine Harvest, probably the most experienced firm in the business.

Yet there are alternatives available in aquaculture which could bring us wealth and which are particularly suited to Ireland's coastline. Given a change in the ridiculous foreshore rights laws opportunities would exist for seaweed cultivation on a substantial scale to benefit from Far Eastern demand.

Every reader will know that if the attention given to agriculture in Ireland had been applied to the marine industry that we would have big "clout" on the north atlantic today.

Environmentalists are demanding a cut-back in animal farming due to methane pollution, and this could alter our whole agricultural economy if the subject gained international momentum.

Such an event could bring about a reassessment at Government level of Ireland's marine resources leading to recognition that Ireland is an island in one of the world's richest oceans. This would lead to a new Government evaluation of the fish industry.

This could be of great benefit to our industry, which is now hobbled by the quota system as applied to Ireland.

Let's look back on how this originated. Ireland was desperate to get into the EEC and accepted any terms offered by the larger members. Germany at the time was importing



Arthur Reynolds.

85 % of it's seafood requirements and was also building a financial colony in Spain. Ireland needed Germany's support for entry.

The aged Spanish fish industry was a perfect target for investment, especially as funds were also being pumped into Spanish holiday facilities which would bring in millions of seafood customers. A perfect recipe for wealth if ever there was.

But guarantees were required that there would be no shortage of stocks to satisfy the market and those stocks mainly lay west and southwest of Ireland. Banks in other countries also recognized the same opportunities that existed in Spain.

So, the quota system was designed to protect not the stocks but who had the greatest access to them. Some of the species involved, but not all, had never been thoroughly researched at the time, yet were included.

In my coastline travels around the fish ports

quotas are the main topic, especially with fishermen now working vessels of a size and sophistication capable of landing more fish than they do. "There is plenty of fish out there if we were allowed to catch it" is a common remark.

How can Ireland solve this problem? Is there a light on the horizon? There is.

In recent years our country has been gaining international respect through our positive efforts to reduce our foreign debts. This has given us more status and respect at the negotiation table on all subjects, including on maritime rights of which we were cheated.

The qualities of our fish products has been raised due to the constant efforts of B.I.M., and European fish prices have upheld their levels at a time when national economies have not been at their best.

Ireland also holds a high respect through the achievements of our pelagic fleet, and this



The very first issue of The Irish Skipper in 1944.

respect has helped our exports in other species.

There is another factor that is relevant to our claim to a bigger share in stocks within our fishing orbit. Some owners of our larger whitefish vessels have told me they would increase their catching power from their own financial resources given better quotas. This confidence from the people who know the business from the inside would attract other investors.

However, some others went into the property market at the wrong end of the boom and they got burnt. In the past spare capital has almost always been diverted away from the industry. A look at the fleets in any one of our main ports shows how much progress has been made in the past 50 years.

Before, we did not have the catching power to justify bigger quotas, but now we have, plus the experience necessary for future growth. It was that lacking that was used as an excuse to give Ireland a raw deal.

This year we are celebrating

the bravery and aspirations of the men and women who a hundred years ago strived to bring independence to the nation. They did not do it to change the colour of the letterboxes or for sentimental reasons, no, they did



Arthur Reynolds hard at work in The Irish Skipper Office.

it for the economic prosperity that was denied by historical circumstances.

But it was not only for governments to recognize the potential of our adjacent marine resources, it is for the people also. Flag-waving is not enough.

For the past ten years I have been living in Bergen, the nerve centre of the Norwegian marine industry. Here I frequently see the scope that is within Ireland's potential as well as what would take us many years to achieve.

Having full control of their own waters is the outstanding policy of the country, and the returns that expensive research can bring can so be calculated and when related to market opportunities the rewards are substantial.

For example when the Russian and Eastern Europe economies starts a return to previous requirements Norway knows that it has over a million tonnes of herring solely within it's catching powers. Also the impact of climate change is more evaluated in relation to future market requirements.

Climate change is a major factor in Norway's future fishery policies, particularly related to cod and mackerel. It is considered likely from studies that one of the two major mackerel stocks will be effected by the Arctic's warming.

But the gloom created by the big fall in oil prices that has led to unemployment has been offset by the record fish catches and exports last year, which was front paged in many newspapers.

The future looks good too. Having large values of fish to offer, Norway's exports are able to meet China's requirements. Daily flights carry fish caught by Norwegian vessels off the west coast of America to Shanghai and other centres.

Although I had been a visitor to Norway for some years before I established residence here it was only later that I became fully aware of it's wealth most of which comes from the sea.

There is a holiday home somewhere owned by every tenth person of the population. Excellent education is free and also health services.

It is true that operating over 100 oil rigs has brought the country to it's present standards of wealth, but it is acknowledged that it was the skills learnt through fishing that put Norway into commercial shipping originally and more recently into operating oil rigs at sea. About a tenth of the world's cargoes are carried in Norwegian-owned ships.

So, the light on the horizon could well be lighter than we think.