

ASEM FISHERIES FEATURE FOR INDEPENDENT DISTRIBUTION

FISHING is one of the oldest of human occupations. For thousands of years, mankind has sought to harvest the sea - firstly for its own ends, and then for commercial gain.

Today, it remains an important global industry. Indeed, as the world's population increases and access to food becomes more of a challenge, there is a strong argument that fisheries have never been more crucial.

But the oceans cannot be harvested freely. To allow unrestricted access to what is a precious and fragile resource could spell disaster for the planet and its people. The consequence of overfishing, ultimately, could be no fishing at all as species become depleted to the point where they can no longer be exploited commercially.

An important conference discussing global fishing is to take place in Brussels on April 28 and 29. The Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) Forum will involve delegates from more than 40 countries who will strive to work together to improve dialogue and mutual understanding and to address some major issues currently affecting the sector.

ASEM's influence in helping to shape the future in this area cannot be understated. It has 45 members and its partner countries together represent half the world's GDP, almost 60 per cent of the world's population and 60 per cent of global trade.

Marine fisheries is an area where it strongly benefits Asia and Europe to work together in partnership. South East Asian countries are the second most important providers of fish and fishery products to the EU, while the EU itself is the largest importing market of fishery products in the world amounting to €16.4 billion in 2007.

But it is about more than markets, important though these undoubtedly are. Both Asia and Europe are major processors and producers and the industry supports a vast number of people who are reliant on it in one way or another for their incomes.

Discussion on issues related to marine fisheries has already taken place among ASEM countries - the first meeting between members on the issue took place in Yantai, China last September. Issues and challenges which were introduced then will be revisited at this month's Brussels meeting, which is being hosted by the European Commission's Maritime Affairs and Fisheries directorate.

There are serious threats attached to both quality and stock levels which delegates will discuss at this ASEM platform. A whole session is devoted to the issue of **Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated (IUU) fishing**, which continues to be highly damaging to both the industry and the natural environment.

It is a global problem which requires a global response, and it is directly relevant to ASEM members.

Taking strong action does, however, require strong co-operation from individual countries, as the primary responsibility for stopping illegal activity inevitably has to rest with flag state countries.

This requires a desire to co-operate internationally, a realisation of the importance of the common good, a determination to take tough measures where appropriate - and, perhaps most importantly of all, political will.

The new EU regulation on IUU fishing will come into force at the start of 2010. It calls for a comprehensive control system from the net to the plate in order to ensure efficient enforcement of conservation and management measures.

IUU fishing is also a major issue for Regional Fisheries Management Organisations (RFMOs) which are particularly concerned with the adoption of efficient measures to identify illegal practices and to fight vigorously against the trade of those products as well as the implementation of decision-making procedures to address IUU fishing activities.

Another important issue which delegates to the Brussels conference will discuss is that of **sanitary and phytosanitary measures** in the fisheries sector. It is widely acknowledged that high standards in terms of food safety are paramount for the consumer.

The EU in particular attaches great importance to the production of high quality goods within the context of sustainable trade, but this has a downside, as European standards can be perceived as a trade barrier to exports.

Once again, it is a matter of getting the balance right and ensuring that common concerns are addressed and all views are heard.

ASEM delegates will also reflect on future challenges for tuna Regional Fisheries Management Organisations.

The conference will want to consider how to strengthen their effectiveness and practical actions through common solutions.

Aquaculture will also be placed under the microscope at the event. Development of sustainable fish farming is critical to the worldwide fisheries sector. Both Asian and European countries agree on the growing importance of this industry in order to supply world markets.

There are questions of environmental integrity and social responsibility to be addressed in relation to aquaculture, but there is a strong feeling that sustainable development of the sector can be helped by Asians and Europeans working in close collaboration.

The ASEM Forum will also provide an unparalleled opportunity for those involved in global marine fisheries to network with each other. The conference has been timed to take place alongside the 16th Annual European Seafood Exposition (ESE), which is the largest seafood event in the world.

The seafood event is taking place Brussels, at the Heysel 'Parc des Expositions' and ASEM delegates will be visiting in order to view the stands, to network and to share insights and information.

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