COMMISSION NOT UP TO THE TASK

As ECO goes to press, the prospects for any substantial response by the Commission for the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources to the unsustainable toothfish fisheries currently underway in Antarctic waters look bleak.

Throughout the two week Hobart meeting, delegates have been subjected to a continuing litany of demonstrations that illegal, unregulated and unreported fishing continues; that it is in fact increasing; and that it involves vessels flagged, owned, operated or controlled by Members of the Commission.

A number of Commission Members are almost entirely failing in their duties as flag-states. They impose no effective control over vessels flagged in their ports, and generally won’t admit to knowing where these vessels are or what they are doing. Whenever their vessels are apprehended by somebody else (and of course, most aren’t), we see the same pattern of reaction:

- denial that it is in fact one of their vessels for as long as possible;
- when ultimately forced to concede as much, loudly proclaiming that the suggestion that one of their vessels has done anything wrong is an affront to national dignity, sovereignty and the price of fish;
- insistence that they must make further enquiries through agencies at home (for whom it is always the weekend, or the key person on vacation);
- assertion that - unfortunately - there is insufficient legal basis for doing anything in this particular case, whilst reassuring the Commission that their state has always fully complied with all CCAMLR obligations.

Conservation Measures nominally in place to regulate the fisheries are consistently breached. Vessel Monitoring Systems mean anything from conscientious and automated data transmission to arbitrary figures faxed through to a mate on the take. The Catch Documentation Scheme is riven with fraud.

Yet, despite this, offending Commission Members – most notably Russia, Korea and Uruguay – continue to sit around the table deciding toothfish catches for the next season. Uruguay was even allowed to Chair the session responsible for assessing compliance with CCAMLR Conservation Measures. Representatives of known pirate fishing companies sit in the meetings in the guise of delegates of the familiar offending states.

Let’s take a guess at what will happen this year.

- Catches will be increased. Nothing ever deters this.
- Russia, Uruguay and others with lousy compliance with Conservation Measures will be granted catch in all the areas where they have applications. There will be all sorts of waffle about why they were not denied catch concessions.
- A single statistical sub-area, that is already fished out anyway, will be closed to the legal fishery. This won’t stop the IUU operators, but it allows the Commission to appear to do something bold.
- Some improvements in the Vessel Monitoring System and Catch Documentation Scheme will most likely be agreed on an entirely voluntary and provisional basis. Of course, these measures will be conscientiously applied by the states that aren’t a problem anyway. The pirate operators will not employ them.

And so, once again the wheel will have turned. More fish caught, more albatross and other seabirds (and other fish!) butchered in the process. All very difficult, as you see. But at least we have better documentation of the problem. WE ARE MAKING PROGRESS. Everybody must be patient. Delegations are saying that IUU fishing is an enormous problem AND THAT CCAMLR MEMBERS ARE A LARGE PART OF THAT PROBLEM. And of course, despite having trashed every substantial proposal to address the problems, and divvied up the fish as usual, CCAMLR XXI will be declared A RESOUNDING SUCCESS.
ECO hopes that delegates will prove us wrong, and our fears ungrounded. However, many years of observing these meetings have suggested otherwise. Who is undermining CCAMLR's credibility here?

THE GOOD GUYS

ECO believes that CCAMLR is in deep trouble, but it would be unfair to sign off without an appreciative word for those few delegations that have genuinely tried to address the issues. Australia, New Zealand and the US have each made serious proposals that would – if adopted – make a difference.

AN OPEN LETTER FROM ALAIN

Mes chers delegats,

I pen this note just before taking wing for Southern climes. I must wander. Two weeks in one place is enough to drive an albatross slightly batty, and I need my sight to spot the slivers of silver that I call dinner below the surface.

I have feasted on the spicy calamari salad at that lovely seafood place in Salamanca, I have partaken of the hot chocolate (with just a hint of nutmeg) at the bakery in Battery Point. It is time to fly....

Before I spread my humble *irgr, however, I feel I must speak of the terrible plight of my finned friend Tommy and his dwindling family: of his cousin Themba who used to live around Prince Edward Island; his great nephew Tobi hailing from Heard Island; his Aunt Therese (twice removed) from Kerguelen, and his Great Grandpa Tilo who swam the waters around South America visiting relatives in the waters of nearby sub-Antarctic islands.

All are gone now. Some grilled, some boiled, others stir-fried. Ironically, while in life they largely stayed south of the Antarctic Convergence, in death, they travelled the world. Headed and tailed, they visited the exotic ports of Hong Kong, Singapore, Quingdao. Some went to Montreal, New York or Vigo, others to San Francisco via Vancouver and a bumpy truck ride. Virtually all landed up on a table in the Northern hemisphere, served with a side order of rice or potatoes, some just-cooked baby carrots in tarragon sauce and a good glass of the house white - or sake.

And then there were those that went from murky ocean depths to the soaring heights 30,000 feet above sea level -- to the first class air passengers (you really can never overcook a piece of toothfish you know).

Tommy is not proud of it, but has to admit that with his family's history of low fecundity, there is not much hope now - Pfizer does not see any profits in toothfish farming. There has been talk of toothfish aquaculture, but Tommy and his relatives are not known for staying in one place, and he does not think that toothfish farming is the wave of the future.

I too feel like my wings have been clipped, like there is an albatross about my neck ... for while Tommy may live in the depths of the mighty Southern Ocean, I soar above it. Albatrosses are known to get confused after flying for days and days (the bleak swells and strong winds of the Southern Ocean will do that to you), we have been known to dive for bits of fish appearing near the surface only to find that they are attached to hooks that sink down, down to a watery grave. We do not mean to eat from these hooks. We have survived in the past by flying great distances to find our own food. It is just that the bait is so very tantalising. There seem to be fewer and fewer of us, and more and more of those big boats, red hulls rising and falling with the waves.

There is but one thing left to say -- a mournful cry from the creatures that have inspired sailors of yore, a plea of hope to those of you gathered here today.

Please, do something significant NOW. I want to be back here next year. I want to be off the Red List. I want to fly free across the Southern Ocean, to see toothfish swim, krill gather, and great pods of whales drift off towards the horizon - without a vessel in sight.

A bientot, Alain.

ECO
CCAMLR XXI Number 5
31 October 2002, Hobart