Marine Corporation

Longlining generates higher earnings and higher employment per ton than trawled fish. As the demand for fresh fish increases the conflict over the placing of longlines on fishing grounds needs to be addressed.

The Longline Debate

The debate on the comparative merits of longlining and trawling for hake is longstanding. A move around the world toward longlining and away from trawling with recent improvements in the efficiency of longlining and increased concern about the environmental impacts of trawling has sharpened this. Also adding to increased longlining is the stronger preference by consumers for higher quality seafood products which longlining tends to provide.

Southern Africa was one of the last regions to reflect this. Namibia and South Africa since 1993 have moved to allow increased longlining for hake, resulting in small, but valuable industries, based on providing fresh high quality hake by air to Europe.

From this experience and recent studies there generally seem to be no theoretical grounds for fisheries policy to prefer trawling. Available information points to longlining being preferable based on these considerations:

- It is economically advantageous, generating higher earnings, profits and employment per ton than trawled fish;
- It is biologically advantageous. Two important recent studies showed that longlining will produce higher demersal yields than trawling, because longlining targets larger fish. Both methods, however, create problems with incidental mortality – trawling through mortality among smaller fish not escaping through the net mesh, and longlining because of predation on hooked fish by seals;
- It is probably environmentally advantageous because it does not have the physical effect which bottom trawl nets have on the sea bottom, although there is also a concern about incidental deaths of seabirds hooked taking longline bait as they go into the water.

Perhaps more important than these considerations in the short term, however, is the conflict over the placing of longlines on fishing grounds. Longline fishing gear tends to occupy more space on fishing grounds per ton caught than trawling gear. Typically, lines are 10 nautical miles long, and are set for periods of over 12 hours by the time the line is fully hauled, effectively stopping other vessels fishing in the area during that time. And, while the Namibian exclusive economic zone is large, longline vessels tend to concentrate their fishing in localised areas where catch rates are highest, to an even greater degree than trawlers. Operating in this way, the longline vessels get in each other's way, and in the way of trawlers, with resulting conflict that has in one case already led to court action in Namibia. There can be a real economic cost to this fishing pattern. As the number of longline vessels increase, the access of the fleet to the most productive fishing areas is generally reduced.

In the medium term, policy development and seafood market preferences are likely to see further moves towards higher levels of longlining. For this reason the conflict between fishing operations associated with any increase in longlining needs to be addressed.