



Sustainable Management of Marine Living Resources (fisheries) – A Core Element in the Norwegian Government's High North Strategy

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Back in 1987 the so-called World Commission on Environment and Development – which has also been known as The Brundtland Commission – submitted a report called "Our Common Future". In this document the Commission introduced the term "Sustainable Development". This was defined as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs". The term "Sustainable Development" became an instant success. One may say it became a mantra in world politics. It was, for instance, the central theme of such seminal and high-profile events as the Rio Conference on

Environment and Development in 1992 (UNCED) and the Johannesburg World Summit on Sustainable Development in 2002 (WSSD). More specifically for our present context, the expression gained almost universal acceptance as the guiding principle for the management of natural resources.

The sustainable development agenda includes the twin concepts of environment conservation and resource management. I'd like to emphasize that these are actually two aspects of the same issue. The key element in both is sustainability: In simple terms, this means that renewable resources should be used, but not be over-exploited to the point of depletion or extinction. The surplus yield should be harvested prudently and responsibly.

Renewable resources include marine living resources. So when we talk about "management of marine living resources", we are referring to fisheries in the broad sense – meaning that the term "fisheries" includes not only catching fish but also the harvesting of crustaceans (shrimps etc.) and marine mammals (whales & seals). Sustainable management of fisheries is of vital importance for feeding the world's population, so it is a matter of global concern. For some countries, like Norway in particular, this is even more important than for the rest. The marine resources have always provided the basis for our national economy and provided the livelihood for our coastal communities, especially in Northern Norway. Our national well-being is heavily dependent on our access to harvest the surplus of these renewable resources. Today Norway's national economy is dominated by the oil & gas revenues, but the fisheries sector is by a wide margin our second biggest export industry. Sustainable use is therefore a main objective of Norwegian fisheries management policies. In order to attain this objective, our management policies are based on the best available scientific advice and incorporate the ecosystem approach.

But we are not alone in this world. We are not operating in a legal void or in a political vacuum. We form a part of the wider international community. For Norway, this means that we are an active partner in a broad network of international cooperation arrangements concerning the management of fisheries resources. Our management policies are linked to a number of international legal instruments and cooperation agreements, on the global level as well as on the regional or bilateral levels.

Such international agreements include broad framework agreements such as the 1982 U.N. Convention on the Law of the Sea and the 1995 U.N. Fish Stocks Agreement. These are legal instruments which lay down the guiding principles of management objectives as well as the obligation of state parties to cooperate among themselves in order to attain these objectives.

Among such areas of intergovernmental cooperation, special mention should be made of the great efforts carried out during the past few years in order to combat illegal, un-reported and un-regulated fishing, - so-called IUU-fisheries. This is a global problem, which must be addressed at all levels – regionally as well as in a wider international context.

So far, and as a way of introduction, I have attempted to give a very rough presentation of the concept of the sustainable management of marine living resources, and an equally rough outline of Norway's approach to these issues. In case anyone wonders or gets the wrong idea, I must point out that this approach is not a uniquely Norwegian phenomenon or invention. It is in fact an approach which is shared by all responsible countries and management bodies of the contemporary world.

I'd also like to stress that the principles and objectives that I have described, apply equally to any geographical region or sub-region of the oceans of the world. My point is that there is nothing unique or special about the Arctic that would call for a substantially different or novel approach to dealing with these issues which we are discussing here.

The theme of our afternoon program is "Sustainable use of Natural Resources in the Arctic". That means we'll have to take a look at our geographical terminology. "The Arctic" is a very broad term, which also includes the ice-covered Central Arctic Ocean (or the inner North Polar Basin), where there are hardly any natural resources to discuss. Instead of looking at the Arctic in the broad sense, I'd like to invite the audience to adopt a somewhat different perspective, with a more modest scope. My focus will be on the phenomenon which in contemporary Norwegian political vocabulary and in current governmental vernacular is termed "The High North".

So what is "the High North", and in what way does it differ from "the Arctic"?

The current definition of the concept "The High North" can be found in two policy documents, viz. The Norwegian Government's High North Strategy (launched 1.12.06.) and a follow-up document called New Building Blocks in the North, subtitle The next step in the Government's High North Strategy (published 12.03.09.).

It is a rather elusive definition, which I will show by a quote from the former document. It runs like this:

"The High North is a broad concept both geographically and politically. In geographical terms, it covers the sea and land, including islands and archipelagos, stretching northwards from the southern boundary of Nordland county in Norway and eastwards from the Greenland Sea to the Barents Sea and the Pechora Sea. In political terms, it includes the administrative entities in Norway, Sweden, Finland and Russia that are part of the Barents Cooperation. Furthermore, Norway's High North policy overlaps with the Nordic cooperation, our relations with the US and Canada through the Arctic Council, and our relations with the EU through the Northern Dimension".

But that was way back, almost three years ago. And as Bob Dylan said, "The times they are a-changing". In contrast, the follow-up document (New Building Blocks, p.50) admits that:

"No precise definition of "the High North" has been provided in the Norwegian political debate. (...) When the Government's High North Strategy was developed in 2006, the High North referred to areas surrounding the Barents Sea. This is really a Norwegian perspective. With regard to closer international cooperation, we must bear in mind that the High North is gradually becoming more synonymous with the Arctic".

What we see here, is a political definition, supplemented with some flexible geographical parameters. "The High North" is, in other words, a political concept, - an elastic and fluid or perhaps even a dynamic political concept, rather than a strictly geographical concept.

In its political platform from 2005, the current Norwegian coalition government stated that it considers the High North to be Norway's most important strategic priority area in the years ahead. So, the High North Strategy was designed as a means of translating this part of the platform into practical policy.

The Strategy identified Seven main political priorities - and I'm afraid I have to read them all out to you:

1. Norway will exercise its authority in the High North in a credible, consistent and predictable way.
2. Norway will be at the forefront of international efforts to develop knowledge in and about the High North.
3. We intend to be the best steward of the environment and natural resources in the High North.
4. We will provide a suitable framework for further development of petroleum activities in the Barents Sea, and will seek to ensure that these activities boost competence in Norway in general and in North Norway in particular, and foster local and regional business development.
5. We intend the High North policy to play a role in safeguarding the livelihoods, traditions and cultures of indigenous peoples in the High North.
6. We will further develop people-to-people cooperation in the High North.
7. We will strengthen our cooperation with Russia.

The follow-up document presented a series of strategic priority areas which would serve as new building blocks in the Government's High North policy. Here, the Government announced its intention to:

1. Develop knowledge about climate and the environment in the High North.
2. Improve monitoring, emergency response and maritime safety systems in northern waters.
3. Promote sustainable development of offshore petroleum and renewable marine resources.
4. Promote onshore business development.
5. Further develop the infrastructure in the north.
6. Continue to exercise sovereignty firmly and strengthen cross-border cooperation in the north.
7. Safeguard the culture and livelihoods of indigenous peoples.

As we can see, the High North Strategy is partly a declaration of intents, partly an action program. As such, it (1) is highly ambitious, and (2) encompasses an extremely broad range or scope of subject matter. Among all these priorities which are listed in the Strategy, "sustainable management of marine living resources" does not – at a first glance - seem to be a particularly prominent topic. But as we know, appearances may sometimes be misleading. Sustainable management of marine living resources is in fact a core element of our High North Strategy.

And why is that?

This follows from the fact that the Barents Sea is home to some of the world's most abundant fish resources. As I mentioned briefly initially, these resources are also the mainstay of value-creation, employment and the very livelihood of the population in our northern regions. These are also the core objectives which the High North Strategy is designed to promote.

Norway has the responsibility to ensure that these resources are managed in a responsible and sustainable manner. But it is not a responsibility that is ours alone, - this is a responsibility which we share with our neighboring countries as well as with the wider international community. Responsible management of the marine environment and its resources is a trans-boundary consideration, which necessitates a strong dimension of regional and international cooperation.

States in the High North have for a long time engaged actively in such cooperation with substantial success. The Norwegian-Russian bilateral cooperation on the management of fish resources in the Barents Sea has worked well for many years and formed the basis for a viable and robust management regime. The North-East Atlantic Fisheries Commission (NEAFC) is a prime example of a successful regional management organization. Rational management of marine, maritime and coastal issues necessitates adopting a broad approach, which should encompass and reconcile the sometimes diverging interests of fisheries, sea transport and petroleum industry. For this purpose, Norway has developed and adopted an Integrated Management Plan for the Norwegian part of the Barents Sea. The aim of the plan is to facilitate long-term value-creation based on the sustainable use of the resources of the sea areas, while preserving the structures and productivity of their ecosystems. The key-word of the management plan is co-existence within the parameters of sustainable development.

We believe that the basic approach of the plan – ecosystem-based management – should govern the management of the resources of the Arctic as well as everywhere else. This is also an approach which permeates all applicable elements of the Norwegian Government's High North Strategy.

Furthermore, I'd like to drive home the message that Norway's High North Strategy also includes an active commitment to engage in mutually beneficial cooperation with other countries – bilaterally as well as regionally – on matters concerning such management tasks and mechanisms.

There is one more topic that deserves a very brief comment:

In 5 weeks' time we'll observe the 50th anniversary of the signing of the Antarctic Treaty. In recent years we have witnessed a growing interest in the Antarctic Treaty system as a possible model for addressing the perceived needs for a comprehensive international agreement regulating the corresponding political and legal issues in the Arctic, including the ice-covered Central Arctic Ocean (the inner North Polar Basin). Such visionary ideas captured the imagination of many – including myself – back in the early 1970's. Even at that time it was nevertheless obvious that the conditions and the needs in the Antarctic and the Arctic were so different that the "Antarctic Model" would have very limited applicability in the Arctic. Today, that is even more so the case. With the emergence of national EEZ's and the development of international law – such as the 1982 UNCLOS and the 1995 Fish Stocks Agreement – the Arctic Ocean is no longer a legal void. There is in fact no need for the introduction of new, over-reaching international legal instruments to address such issues in the Arctic. This, I'd like to emphasize, is also the case with regard to the alleged or perceived needs to regulate possible future fisheries in the ice-covered Central Arctic Ocean. Norway's position on this matter was expressed in the so-called Ilulissat Declaration of May 2008, which was signed by the 5 coastal states adjacent to the inner North Polar Basin.