



Secrecy in international fisheries management: bad news for our oceans?

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Who controls the world's oceans?

Even though this is a massive question, the answer is problematic to say the least.

It's problematic in that the only bodies with any meaningful say in what happens to the oceans are 17 obscure organizations that are heavily focused on the management of fish as a commodity.

The problem is not simply a result of the obscurity of these bodies, called Regional Fisheries Management Organizations (RFMOs, for short), or even of their near-singular focus on industrial fishing, but that these organizations can't even manage the fisheries properly.

To a certain extent, we don't even know what's actually going on in the oceans - because some RFMOs conduct critical meetings in secret, or foster processes where decisions are reached secretly and informally outside of their official and public mechanisms.

Two major examples are the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission (WCPFC), which rules over nearly 60 percent of the world's tuna supply, and the North East Atlantic Fisheries Commission (NEAFC), whose major "management success" these years has been to allow the overfishing of its three main fish stocks: mackerel, atlanto-scandian herring and blue whiting.

The case of the WCPFC, which consists of a mix of Pacific island nations combined with global fishing powerhouses like China, Japan, the US, and the European Union,

involves its island nations bloc insisting on having its key compliance discussions in secret, while its leaders complain about accusations of secrecy.

As the WCPFC's Technical and Compliance Committee gathered in late September in Pohnpei, Federated States of Micronesia, its chair, Dr. Josie Tamate of the nation of Niue, said to the delegates: "There are those on the outside who are looking for ways to question what we do. There are also comments that the WCPFC is working in secret. We all know that is not true because our work is guided by the processes and systems we have established over years."

Minutes later, it was announced that the NGO observers, a number of whom had traveled several days to reach the meeting location, would be excluded for a secret portion of the meeting that would last for three days.

In the Northeast Atlantic, fisheries management secrecy takes a different, and potentially more destructive form, as evidenced by the poor sustainability levels when it comes to mackerel, herring and blue whiting.

Indeed, NEAFC generally allows its most sensitive decisions to be made through its "Coastal States Consultations," ad hoc meetings consisting of the states involved in the fishery where these states make decisions. States involved in these consultations are Iceland, Norway, the Faroes Islands, the European Union, the United Kingdom, Greenland and the Russian Federation.

The Coastal States consultations actually lack any formalized framework, meaning that, among other missing items, any explicit requirements for openness and transparency are lacking and totally depends on the goodwill of the states involved.

Observer participation in these consultations is virtually non-existent, because of the informal nature of the governance process and because the policy decisions are difficult even for veteran fisheries journalists and other experts to monitor or track.

Even within NEAFC's formal activities, barriers to meaningful NGO observer participation are formidable. Only NGOs with "good standing" in the eyes of NEAFC are eligible to apply. NGO observer access is limited to the NEAFC annual general meeting, and to only one of its three permanent committees (the Permanent Committee on Management and Science, PECMAS). No access is offered to its other two committees, its three permanent working groups, or to any of its ad hoc working groups. The only exceptions are made if observers are approved by consensus, and then only on a case-by-case basis.

And in return for being allowed into a NEAFC meeting, observers must agree to abide by policies that restrict them from making recordings, issuing press releases or other information to the media, or using social media to publish information on

agenda items under discussion. These restrictions go well beyond those required of NGO observers in other international meetings.

Implications beyond fisheries management

Aside from the implications of secrecy on the ability by countries to monitor and maintain the health of the world's fisheries themselves, the governance issues baked into the RFMO system do not bode well for involving the broader range of stakeholders interested in the broader management of the oceans, especially those who want to progress on achieving the interlinked internationally-agreed objectives of sustainable fisheries and biodiversity protection.

A more mature governance approach for RFMOs could allow them to evolve into bodies capable of a more ambitious oceans management role, and potentially alleviate the need for a complicated and time-consuming task of creating an alternative structure for oceans governance.

But the continuing resistance of key RFMOs to treating stakeholders with even basic evenhandedness does not bode well. The one missing element is that RFMOs have been able to shield themselves through their collective obscurity as well as their obsessive secrecy, and that their member states and even most NGOs have been content to allow them to do so.

This needs to change. Increasing the transparency of RFMOs a prerequisite for better fisheries management, and a critical requirement if the RFMO system is to evolve into a viable basis for a more holistic approach to oceans management.

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