

EU Common Fisheries Policy failure? Assessing the role of informational lobbying and policy belief updating processes

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Abstract: Since the foundation of the EU Common Fisheries Policy (CFP), and despite incremental progress, the policy continues to be criticized for failing to achieve its key objectives. Examining the underlying drivers of this inefficiency by applying an integrated non-cooperative bargaining model and a social network analysis, we show that although, individually, policy makers and other stakeholder organizations mostly prefer environmental goals, overfishing decisions are still an equilibrium outcome of the CFP key instrument. Theoretically, belief updating and policy learning processes should occur in the CFP stakeholder network through lobbying. However, empirically, communicational lobbying is only partially explaining the outcomes of this collective action problem. Therefore, beyond communication lobbying, biased initial beliefs of decision makers on how specific policy measures impact environmental outcomes constitutes a central cause of ineffective decision-making. These biases are further shaped by oversimplified narratives, which act as barriers for achieving the EU green and blue transition.

Keywords: Policy Networks, Lobbying, Politicization, Policy learning, Elites

Politikversagen in der EU Fischereipolitik? Eine Bewertung der Rolle von informationsbasierten Lobbying und der Prozesse zur Aktualisierung politischer Überzeugungen

Zusammenfassung: Die Gemeinsame Fischereipolitik (GFP) der EU wird seit ihrer Implementierung trotz schrittweiser Fortschritte immer wieder dafür kritisiert, dass sie ihre wichtigsten Ziele nicht erreicht. Durch die Untersuchung der Ursachen für diese Ineffizienz anhand der Anwendung eines integrierten nicht-kooperativen Verhandlungsmodells und einer Analyse sozialer Netzwerke zeigen wir, dass – obwohl die politischen Entscheidungsträger und andere Interessengruppen meist Umweltziele präferieren –, Überfischungsentscheidungen immer noch ein Gleichgewichtsergebnis des zentralen GFP-Instruments sind. Theoretisch sollten durch Lobbying eine Aktualisierung von Überzeugungen und Lernprozesse im Netzwerk der GFP-Stakeholder stattfinden. Empirisch erklärt Lobbyismus durch Kommunikation jedoch nur teilweise die Ergebnisse dieses Problems kollektiven Handelns. Daher müssen neben Lobbyismus durch Kommunikation auch die verzerrten initialen Überzeugungen der Entscheidungsträger darüber, wie sich bestimmte politische Maßnahmen auf die Umweltergebnisse auswirken, eine zentrale Ursache für ineffektive Entscheidungsfindung darstellen. Diese Verzerrungen werden außerdem durch vereinfachte Narrative geprägt, die als Hindernisse für die Verwirklichung des grünen und blauen Wandels in der EU wirken.

Schlagwörter: Politiknetzwerke, Lobbyismus, Politisierung, Politiklernen, Eliten

1 Introduction

The European Green Deal stresses the role of the European Union's Common Fisheries Policy (CFP) in conserving and restoring Europe's seas, as well as facilitating the transition to healthy, fair and sustainable food systems. Changes in CFP policy instruments and their implementation over the last two decades, as well as other environmental changes, led to about 50% reduction in the number of overfished North East Atlantic fish stocks. However, about 30% of the stocks in the North East Atlantic have still collapsed or remain in a poor state, below safe biological limits (STECF, 2024). In the Baltic Sea, most fish species have drastically decreased in resilience. However, fishing quotas (Total Allowable Catch, TAC) are often being allocated by the EU Council above scientific advice. This raises the question of whether the environmental objectives of the Common Fisheries Policy are being effectively pursued and, if so, whether they are being approached (i) gradually and incrementally, (ii) rapidly, or (iii) whether there is a concerning trend inversion for certain fish populations. We address these questions through examining the CFP instrument toolbox, its perception by stakeholders and use.

The CFP objectives were to be achieved by 2020, a timeline that did not fully materialize. As a response, in addition to strengthening and hardening fisheries regulation such as control and enforcement, the European Commission is using a soft governance approach, including roadmaps, first through the 'Marine Action Plan' (2021–2023) which was not adopted by the EU Parliament, and the upcoming new 'Ocean Pact' (2025). How these expected 'soft' commitments of member states impact coherence between different marine policy areas including energy, environmental and fisheries and strengthen the CFP-specific policy instrument remains to be seen. Currently, the Ocean Pact risks neglecting the CFP's unique EU competency dimensions, compared to other environment policies such as the Marine Strategy Framework Directive which is mostly implemented at the national level. Specifically, it is not clear how soft instruments can resolve the potential paradox of 'political overfishing' (Voss et al., 2016) – where a policy prescribes overfishing above safe biological limits and scientific advice.

Why would a political overfishing paradox occur in the EU in the first place? Some scholars point to agriculture ministers' extreme outlier preferences (Franchino & Rahming, 2003), while Martin Quaas et al. (2012) demonstrated overfishing preferences might result from higher discounting rates for specific species, valuing short-term over long-term economical gains. However, while high discount rates might explain why a short-term profit-oriented fish industry might rationally prefer political overfishing, this logic cannot explain why other stakeholders would rationally prefer this result, as overfishing enhances both short- and longer-term damages and delays achievement of policy goals. Hence, two hypotheses are postulated: (i) the general policy preferences of stakeholders and political actors are biased to a certain extent, and (ii) the process by which CFP policy instruments' preferences are updated, may explain this bias.

Often, political agents apply simple narratives (Vogeler et al., 2021), where political elite groups may influence public opinion, converting scientific and natural phenomena as simpler stories and narratives which are easier to understand than the complex models behind them (Fuchs, 2015). For example, the EU Council decisions on Total Allowable Catch cuts often appear in the public media as an issue linkage narrative to fishers' short-term employment,