Flying south for the summer

AFWG meet in Copenhagen

ICES Arctic Fisheries Working Group (AFWG) met in Copenhagen between 20 and 26 April to discuss the assessment of fish stocks in the northeast Arctic region. This working group has been meeting annually for 53 years (with the exception of 1962–1964 and 1968), making it the longest running ICES working group still in existence. The first meeting took place in Bergen in 1959; since then, the participants have convened mainly in Denmark, with a scattering of meetings in Germany, Russia, Spain, Portugal, Russia, and Norway. At the time of the group's founding, cod and haddock were the main stocks under consideration. Today they remain important to the group's work, along with the other stocks that have been added through the years.

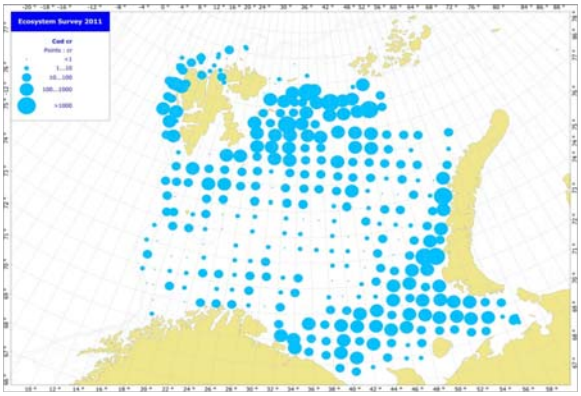
Bjarte Bogstad, Chair of ICES AFWG.

Unlike other ICES working groups, membership is less diverse in terms of nationalities. AFWG has always, naturally, been dominated by Norwegian and Russian experts, but the current group also includes participants from Canada (DFO), Germany (VTI), and Spain (IEO).

The main task for AFWG is to assess fish stocks in the Arctic, specifically cod, haddock, saithe, beaked and golden redfish, Greenland halibut, and capelin, as well as analysing the ecosystem conditions for the stocks. Their assessment area includes the Barents Sea and from the northern tip of Spitsbergen down along the Norwegian coast to approximately 62 °N.

Not surprisingly, the issue of climate change is on the agenda, but when working group members are asked if they are seeing an influx of stocks from the warmer southern waters, the answer is no. A more prominent issue is the northward movement of stocks that are already there. AFWG Chair Bjarte Bogstad notes that the distribution of some of the stocks the group assesses has been moving farther north in recent years. This winter saw very little ice in the Arctic area, almost a record low, and this could be one reason that stocks are thriving: they simply have a bigger distribution area.

Although some stocks are struggling as a result of heavy exploitation in the past, for example redfish, which takes 10–15 years to recover, stocks of cod and haddock are doing well. Haddock may have reached its peak last year, but cod seems to be at a level not seen for at least 45 years. This Bogstad puts down to a combination of an efficient management plan and nature being kind.



The Northeast Arctic cod stock geographical distribution 2011.

He hastens to add that the name of their group can be misleading. They only look at stocks in the northeast Arctic, and the same conditions and stock levels do not necessarily apply throughout the Arctic.

The group is now facing a situation that is uncommon for an ICES assessment group. The success and size of the current cod stock has caused fishers and managers to wonder if there is really enough food to sustain all this cod. At the moment, the stock remains stable, but the memory of what happened 25 years ago, when cod (and other predator) stocks became

depleted and underweight because of the low number of prey stocks, persists. Still, Bogstad remains confident for now, “It doesn’t look like we are running into that situation at the moment but it is definitely something to think about. We also have to remember that cod are cannibalistic”. Looking at the food supply from the point of view of the predator is one of the practical applications of an ecosystem approach to management. “This has become a bit of buzzword and it’s often not clear what it really means, but in some instances we try to give it a practical meaning”.

Following the stock assessment and analysis of the various ecosystem factors, appropriate advice will be issued for the sustainable management of the stocks considered by the group. This advice is due to be released on 8 June. Find out more here.

The oceanography and ecology of the Arctic in the context of climate change will play a focal part of the 2012 ICES Annual Science Conference. Read more here.

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