



OPENING THE BOX: THE DAWN OF TRANSPARENCY

Ellen Johannesen joins a group of knowledge-seekers on a course presented by the ICES Training Programme.

“The mind of a scientist can seem unfathomable to some people – as if scientists were aliens with arcane, inaccessible thought processes.”

– Barbara Ettinger

Invited to "open the box" by the ICES Training Programme, participants in the course entitled "Opening the Box: Stock Assessment and Fisheries Advice for Stakeholders, NGOs, and Policy-makers" hoped that they would soon be initiated into the mysteries shrouding the stock assessments and fishery advice issued annually by ICES. To those untrained in the art of compiling graphs and tables, *ICES Advice* has sometimes given the impression of being indecipherable. In the light of a new dawn of transparency, ICES offered this opportunity to look into the box that has seemed closed to so many outsiders.

The reforms to ICES structure and changes in policy carried out in 2006 granted observer status to stakeholders during the advisory process. Consensus-building and participatory approaches are now the order of the day for environmental management and decision-making. Bringing more transparency to the advisory process by opening it to observers builds confidence in the process's rigorous scientific method and confirms that the advice is not merely the product of whim or magic.

Although opening the box allows outsiders to peer in, communicating the language of science to non-scientists remains a challenge. This challenge is described by Doug Wilson in his book *The Paradoxes of Transparency*. The paradox lies in the observation that, although the process of producing fishery advice has now been revealed, a certain level of mathematical skill is still required in order to understand the assessments and advice.

ICES Advice is a massive report that, in the past, has relied heavily on tables and graphs, with a formally worded text. It is clearly meant for users who are trained in the mathematics and discipline of fishery science, and who require or request specific information. It is therefore difficult for the non-expert to extract the essence of the often complex information, which can lead to overgeneralization and loss of subtle distinctions. Nonetheless, in response to new demands from clients and stakeholders, it is now necessary to distil the advice into clear and simple messages.

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How can we balance these two conflicting approaches to *ICES Advice*? One way, producing advice that non-experts can understand, is an important part of transparency and democratic management of natural resources. Training stakeholders and observers how to understand the calculations that make the stock assessment models work is another way, and ICES is currently pursuing both of these strategies.



▲ Participants on the ICES Training Course "Opening the Box: Stock Assessment and Fisheries Advice for Stakeholders, NGOs, and Policy-makers" outside ICES Secretariat, Copenhagen in October 2010.

ICES Training Programme is a new and developing part of ICES capacity that was launched in 2009. As an international intergovernmental organization, ICES is ideally placed to command a large audience for training. The ICES Training Committee is comprised of high-profile scientists from institutes of ICES Member Countries, who can assess the training needs of the ICES Community. When the training courses began, courses on stock assessment were offered at both an introductory and an advanced level. During one of the introductory courses, it was suggested that another course be added – one that focused less on how to calculate assessment models and more on understanding how they work. It became clear that the demand among stakeholders was to understand the assessment process but not necessarily to calculate the assessments themselves.

Therefore, the Training Committee took the next logical step and launched the course "Opening the Box". The name refers to the historical black-box approach that was the norm in the ICES fishery advice process until the 1990s, when working-group scientists involved in producing the advice were not allowed to communicate with anyone (even their institutions) before it was completed. This policy was driven by the fear that messages would be misinterpreted before agreement had been finalized. This approach enabled fishery science to speak with one voice, but it did not help outsiders to understand the process. These days, the box is opening, but even with an open

box, the complexity of the assessment process makes it difficult for the average stakeholder to understand.

This may explain why thirty-six students were at the ready when this course opened in October 2010. Countries from Northern Europe were well represented, and participants from outside the ICES Area included one each from Italy, Greece, and Hong Kong. It is notable that when participants were asked to organize themselves into four categories – fisheries, policy, research, and NGOs – the four groups were roughly even. This happy and totally random distribution was a feature that many participants, as well as the instructors, described as a strength of the course.

With the arrival of the era of transparency all this is set to change, and ICES has decided to light the way for the uninitiated.

Defined by the focus of their work, participants from each category cited understanding the advice as their main reason for attending the course. One participant, Björn Stockhausen from the Institute for the Protection and Security of the Citizen (IPSC), part of the European Commission's Joint Research Centre, also noted the

importance of stakeholders understanding the process from the outset: "Stakeholders should be involved from the beginning any time policy is being developed and decision-makers are making decisions that will affect them, not just in fisheries".

The three instructors, Martin Pastoors (Centre for Marine Policy, the Netherlands), Christopher Zimmermann (von Thunen Institute/Institute for Baltic Sea Fisheries, Germany), and Ciaran Kelly (Marine Institute, Ireland) are all seasoned fishery scientists with many years of involvement in the ICES advisory process. Martin Pastoors previously chaired the Advisory Committee on Fishery Management, and Chris Zimmermann is a current member of the Advisory Committee.

The three-day course, which covered a vast amount of information, was dynamic, with instructors responding to questions by tailoring presentations to the needs of the participants.

Instructor Ciaran Kelly explained that the aim behind "opening the box" was not only to enable people to understand complex assessments but also to welcome stakeholders to the Secretariat. According to Kelly, "We wanted to open the box by creating an opportunity for people to look in, and get them in the building and meet the staff. Many ICES clients are remote, and this exercise helped the users of the *ICES Advice* understand the organization. Being welcomed into the office of the General Secretary and being allowed to ask questions outside the scope of the course helped them to understand the organization. So, in this respect we achieved the goal of letting people look into ICES and the advice".

Participant Sally Clink, Executive Secretary of the Baltic Sea Regional Advisory Council, considered this aspect of the course a highlight, because she has often viewed ICES as a closed organization. "Sometimes, it seems as if the blinds are drawn down, the buttons get pushed, and then the answer is spat out".

Although the instructors did an excellent job of "demystifying" the advice process, the opportunity to work alongside fellow stakeholders reminded her of "the socio-economic realities.... Fishers depend on this advice, and we need to be confident that the decisions being taken are the right ones".

On the other hand, David Anderson, Chief Executive Officer of the Aberdeen Fish Producers Organisation, someone who is well acquainted with the tension between all of the parties involved – scientists, politicians, and industry – developed a greater awareness of the tasks that the scientists faced.

ICES role as an international inter-governmental organization leaves it poised to command a large audience for training.

Overall, the course was well received and its success was further underlined by the unanimous feeling that it should be continued and possibly offered as a three-tiered programme: introductory, intermediate, and advanced.

Literature cited

ICES. 2010. *Report of the Training Course: Opening the box: Stock assessment and fisheries advice for stakeholders, NGOs and policy-makers (TCSAFAS), 5–7 October 2010, ICES Headquarters, Copenhagen. 14 pp.*

Wilson, D. C. 2009. *The Paradoxes of Transparency – Science and the Ecosystem Approach to Fisheries Management in Europe. MARE Publication Series No. 5, Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam. 197 pp.*



▲ Taking a break from the course: participants Alexandre Rodriguez from NWWAC and Louize Hill from WWF try out the ecoOcean game.