POLITICAL PODIUM

Viewpoints from across the political spectrum. This week: the Liberal Democrat MP for St Ives

PROTECTING BLUEFIN – AND THE FUTURE FISHERY

By **ANDREW GEORGE MP**

I'VE ALWAYS HAD enormous admiration for our fishing industry. It's a tough life, and most of those engaged in it never want to leave it.

And that's the point. Because contrary to the claims and accusations of some, the vast majority of those in the fishing industry want it to be managed sustainably. It's no good to them if they boom and then go bust.

I've held a consistent view of fishing throughout my 30-plus years in national politics – a view in part informed by my upbringing as someone born and brought up in West Cornwall, with a small family fishing boat in the cove (used, in our case, more for hobby fishing – potting and handlining), and with relatives who've spent a lifetime in the industry.

I've always considered the ingredients to success include:

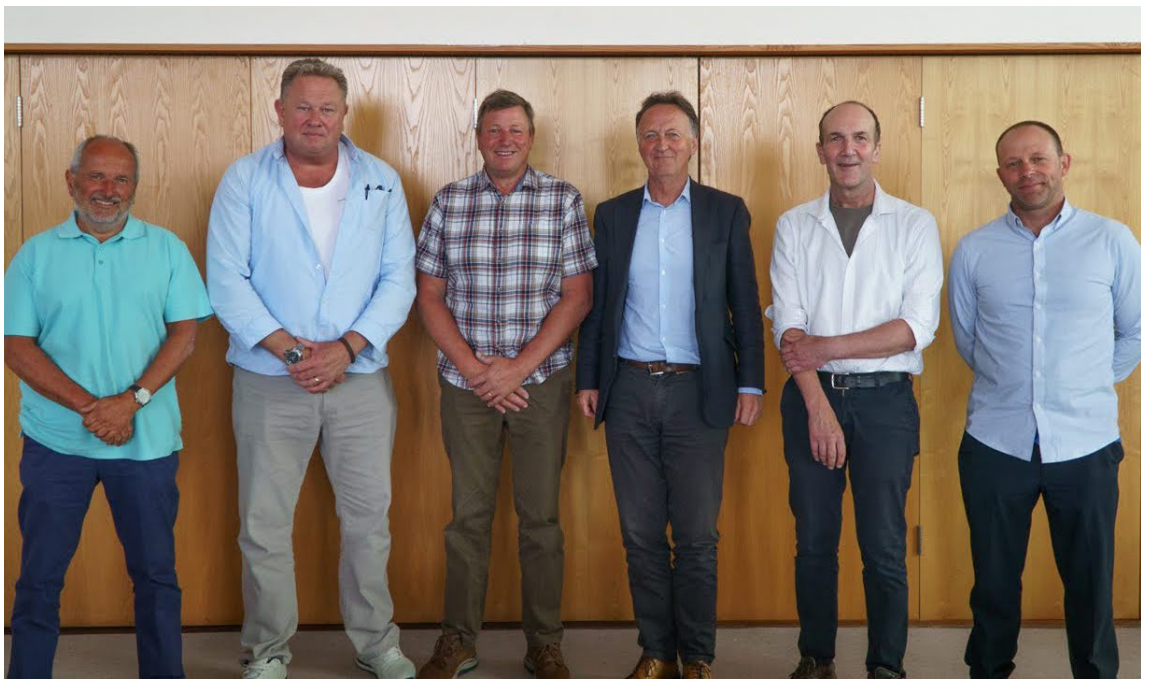
1. For fishermen and scientists to work closely together and to build mutual respect
2. For marine biologists and conservationists to advise and work with the industry, and for all to build a relationship of mutual respect
3. For fishermen, scientists and conservationists to be given the power to agree on the best management regime
4. To keep politicians out of the decision-making process as much as possible.

Having 'come back' to Parliament after a nine-year 'sabbatical', I find the industry much politically weakened, even though it was much exploited as the poster-boy for policy-making and in the infamous referendum. But there's no point looking back.

We must make the best of the government and the fishing minister we have. I find Daniel Zeichner personable; he listens, and I don't doubt his intentions are honourable. However, the fishing industry's further weakened status in government seems to indicate there's more work needed to ensure the minister's voice is not ignored by the prime minister.

> **"The evidence suggests that bluefin need sufficiently deep water to recover. I am asking the minister which part of the evidence he is unpersuaded by, and if it is insufficient, whether Defra is commissioning further research into this matter**

Failure to secure exclusive access within the 12-mile limit earlier this year was the latest demonstration of this weakness. There's more work to do to rebuild the industry's status at Westminster.



▲ **Left to right: scientist Richard Kirby, charter skipper Nigel Hodge, Andrew Pascoe, chair of the South West Handline Fishermen's Association, Andrew George MP, Andy Read from *FN* and Matt Slater of the Cornwall Wildlife Trust at the bluefin tuna meeting held in Newlyn in May.**

Fishing News kindly invited me to chair a seminar in Newlyn this spring on the specific challenges faced within the bluefin tuna fishery (*FN*, 29 May, *'Bluefin fishery: a way forward?'*). Attended by industry reps, fishermen, scientists and representatives of the local Wildlife Trust, it was a good example of how to address the challenges in the industry and how to build a consensus.

Following the meeting, I wrote to the minister to seek both parity in the allocation of quota and for the UK to more closely follow the improving and up-to-date science to avert otherwise avoidable mortality.

The minister explained in his reply: "The UK plan was endorsed by the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas (ICCAT) in March." Time will tell if ICCAT endorses the UK's future plans in light of the mortality being reported in the media this season.

The minister then provided the breakdown of the UK quota: the 66.15t total includes 45t for 15 commercial fishing vessels (average 3t each), and 13t for incidental mortality in 180 catch and release permits (average 72kg per boat), and confirmed that negotiations for the next three-year quota share will conclude in November.

He explained that increasing the UK share from 0.16% will be 'challenging'. One would hope that the widespread reports of record quantities of tuna in our UK waters would make our representative more bullish about our negotiating position...

On the question of poor practice by some recreational anglers, the minister said: "Permit allocations for the 2025 Bluefin Tuna Catch and Release Recreational Fishery (BFT CRRF) prioritised individuals that demonstrated training and experience to support the highest standards in the fishery," and: "The Marine Management Organisation will monitor reporting rates and cross-check volumes against intelligence and stakeholder feedback on levels of recreational BFT activity and incidental mortality." So anyone who witnesses tuna mortality or breaches of the code should report it to the MMO without delay.

On the question of ensuring that tuna are only caught and released in deep water, it was disappointing to read the minister's claim that: "There is limited scientific evidence to support introducing permit conditions to restrict the BFT CRRF to operating only in certain water depths."

One of those who attended the Newlyn seminar, scientist Richard Kirby, has since responded with concern that it seems the MMO has not kept up to date with the science, that fishing in shallow waters increases the likelihood of tuna mortality after release, and that other practices shown on social media provide evidence of breached guidelines.

Richard further advised: "I do not know why or how Daniel Zeichner has come to the conclusion that 'there is limited scientific evidence to restrict the bluefin tuna catch and release recreational fishery to operating only in certain water depths'. Perhaps he has not yet had time to read the two scientific studies that I presented to the MMO and Defra last year?"

"These demonstrate the impact of catch and release in varying conditions and depths, including the higher mortality in shallower water. Thunnus UK's own advice to the UK recreational fishery for improving post-release survival in Atlantic bluefin tuna states: "Care should be taken not to release tuna in water shallower than 50m to avoid the fish making contact with the seabed before it is fully revived."

I am responding to the minister's latest correspondence, and will encourage him to study the evidence which suggests that bluefin tuna need sufficiently deep water to recover. I am asking which part of the evidence he is unpersuaded by; if it is insufficient, whether Defra is commissioning further research into this matter; and whether he accepts (as with so much else in quota-setting policy for other species) that it would be appropriate to apply the precautionary principle to prevent bluefin tuna release in shallow waters.