

Sea Change

Sea Change, Episode 5 – Elspeth Macdonald



Scottish Fisheries Museum: Hello and welcome to Sea Change, a podcast series by the Scottish Fisheries Museum. This podcast asks a selection of the most knowledgeable people their thoughts on the current situations facing our seas, and what they think the future looks like.

SFM: So, today we are here with Elspeth Macdonald for our final Sea Change podcast episode. If Elspeth, you could just introduce yourself with your name, your role and where you are based.

Elspeth Macdonald: I'm Elspeth Macdonald. I'm the Chief Executive of the Scottish Fishermen's Federation. I've been in that role just for seven months so I'm fairly new and I'm based up in Aberdeen. And I am very happy to come and talk to you today.

SFM: So, our first question is sort of your personal connection with the sea. So, how do you interact with the seas in your role?

EM: I've got a lifelong connection with the sea. I grew up in a small fishing community in the west coast of Scotland: I grew up in Tobermory on the isle of Mull, known to many young people as Balamory, full of coloured houses and cartoon - not cartoon characters - but children's characters. But Tobermory where I grew up was, and still is, a fishing port albeit a fairly small one and one where predominantly now the main focus will be on shellfish. But, when I was growing up there, there was a lot of fishing activity

in the town and indeed the town was founded in 1788 by the Fisheries Board at the time to try and develop it as a fishing port. So, I've really got a lifelong connection to the sea and to fishing. My husband is a seafarer by trade, he's a ship's officer but he also started his working life in the fishing industry in Ireland, so I have got lifelong connections to the sea and fishing.

SFM: And I know you've not been sort of, you've been in post for, less than a year?

EM: Yep, seven months.

SFM: So, in your role there specifically how have you been interacting with the sea?

EM: Well clearly my job is to represent the interests of our members, so we've got eight Associations within the membership of the Federation and they represent around 400 vessels in Scotland. And probably make up a large proportion of the tonnage of the fleet. So, my job is to represent their interests and take forward their interests with government and others across a whole range of issues.

So, clearly at moment there has been a focus around the whole change that is coming in fisheries management through Brexit and the opportunities that that presents for the Scottish fishing fleet but also much broader than that. So, around how we interact with government and others around things like marine conservation, protected areas in the sea, how we - how we co-exist with other users of the sea. So, the oil and gas industry, the growing renewables sector and how we really want to continually improve the focus on safety in the industry and really trying to get to a point where it is an industry where people don't get hurt and don't lose their lives.

So there's a huge amount of breadth of work that I'm involved with and whilst I'm mostly either in an office in Aberdeen or in offices in Edinburgh or London, I've also been round our membership, I've been up to Lerwick and Shetland and I've been to Orkney and round the North East so I'm getting out and about and seeing as many members in their own environment as I can.

SFM: And I guess as well, once you have lived by the sea or worked by the sea, it never really leaves you does it?

EM: Yeah that's exactly right and, as I say, I grew up by the sea. When I moved to Aberdeen first it was to study marine and fisheries science. I didn't intend to stay in Aberdeen, but 30 years later, whilst I don't live in the city, I'm working in it, so I feel very closely connected to the sea.

SFM: And you spoke a lot there about how you interact with your members. Is there any ways, sort of, that you engage the public in your work specifically?

EM: I think we do. We have probably engaged the public in ways that maybe is more about what our interests are rather than about the work we do. And I think that is an interesting question, because just last week [the first week of March 2020] in fact, I had a really interesting and useful meeting with a school teacher who is really keen to have better resources available for teachers to use to teach children across all age groups, to teach them more about the fishing industry. I think she felt when she went to find some resources to do a project with a primary school, that the resources were a bit limited and that they weren't maybe terribly up to date. So, I think there's, I think that's a signal that there is a lot more we can do to talk about our industry, and I think it is increasingly important as we look to the future and we think about the, you know, the increasing pressures that will come on all of us

to reduce our carbon footprint and to live more sustainably and I think to really sell and promote to the public the fact that Scottish caught fish is a really good, healthy, sustainable, low carbon food source.

SFM: I mean yeah, quite a large proportion of Scotland is coastal, so it's quite an important part of our heritage but also our present day. And I guess it's quite important to teach that to the younger generations as well.

EM: Yes I think absolutely, and I think that's why this year of Scotland's Coasts and Waters is a great opportunity for us to focus on our aquatic resources and not just the sea but our freshwater resources because as you say Scotland has an enormous coastline, it has a lot of water either around it or on top of it. So, I think we certainly need to make that everybody has an opportunity to learn more about our aquatic and our marine industries and their importance not just today, but also going forward into the future.

SFM: Yeah, absolutely. So, how's your role so far broadened your understanding of the issues facing our seas at the moment?

EM: I think one probably - something I've really reflected on quickly is looking at the increased pressures in terms of use of the sea. We have a good little animation somewhere in the office that shows a map of Scotland and the waters around it and then when you start to build up all the different activities that go on there, whether it is oil and gas installations, fishing activities, marine protected areas, fish farms, aquaculture sites - you start to see it's a very crowded place. So, whilst the sea looks great and big and a huge expanse on the horizon, there's a lot going on there. So, I think one of the real challenges going forward is about how we have effective management of our seas than enables all these

industries to be successful and to be sustainable and to co-exist. So, I think there's a lot I think in the space of marine planning and how we can all work together that's going to be very important for the future.

SFM: And how do you see your role in SFF sort of impacting on that?

EM: I think very much making the case for fishing. You know fishing has gone on in our waters since time immemorial. And sitting here in the museum and just walking through the building today [8th of March 2020] before we sat down to do this recording is a perfect example of that. We've always had fishing activity in our water, we want to continue to have fishing activities in our water but we recognise there are other people now in the "Blue Economy" and therefore, my job has to be to make the case for why fishing needs to remain an important part of that.

SFM: You couldn't have said it better. So, if you could tell someone something that they might not know about our seas what would it be?

EM: Oh, my goodness. Well, I don't do it now but when I was younger, when I was a student, I did quite a lot of diving in Scottish waters and I don't think people, when people stand perhaps looking out to sea on a bit of a cold and windy day like it is today it just looks a bit cold and grey and not particularly inviting. But I think if people really saw the richness and variety and beauty of our subsurface environment, I think people would have a really different, perhaps, take, and yeah, a different take on what our watery environment looks like and so, so I think there's just something about conveying that we have tremendously rich and valuable waters in our Exclusive Economic Zone. So, both inshore

and offshore, you know, it's a tremendous resource and also a very beautiful place.

SFM: And as you have you have not been at the SFF for long, it would really be nice to see if you have got any stories so far about some amazing experiences you have had.

EM: I've certainly had some, I think - I don't know if there's much amazing experiences. I've certainly had some quite surreal, that still feel a bit surreal. I think because the fishing industry currently has a high profile because of the Brexit negotiations and the stage that things are at, I think the thing that has probably been most surprising to me has been the very heightened public profile of the industry and therefore of me because people look to me as a spokesperson for the views of my membership. So, getting up early in the morning to drive into Aberdeen to sit in a little in a little cupboard in Beechgrove Terrace where the BBC studios are, to be interviewed live on the Today Programme is mildly terrifying, but also a great opportunity to be able to get our message across to a large audience.

And I think I have some super opportunities to go and see some of our, some of the industry. On the day I went up to Shetland in the autumn, I was blessed by the most absolutely glorious, beautiful day, blue sky, it was like a day in the Mediterranean and one of their great new pelagic fleet had just come into Lerwick so I was really privileged to see her at first hand and have a look round the absolute state-of-the-art modern fishing vessel.

SFM: Yeah, I mean, for people who don't know so much about specific fishing vessels, can you explain maybe some of the technology that, sort of, allows the fish to be caught.

EM: Yeah, I mean the fishing industry is really diverse and we've got very diverse membership across our Federation members. We've got vessels that would operate mostly in the inshore, small vessels with maybe one or two people operating them, perhaps using creels and pots to catch crabs and lobsters and some of the shellfish species. Then we have our whitefish fleet which are the trawlers that are trawling quite close to the bottom of the sea, the demersal, to catch the demersal species, so things like cod and haddock and whiting and those sorts of fish.

We have a Nephrops, a Nephrops fleet, so they are the trawlers that are catching the prawns you often see in your langoustines and scampis and things like that, so again they are sort of bottom trawling on muddy grounds where the prawns tend to live. We have scallopers, so vessels that are catching scallops which are a great delicacy: many people find them a huge treat.

And then we have the pelagic vessels which are - the pelagic fleet has developed in recent years into quite a small number of large vessels that are really efficient. They're mostly mid water trawling and they are trawling shoals of herring and mackerel predominantly. And these are very seasonal fisheries and they, I think we have, we have, somewhere between twenty and thirty of those in our membership. So, it's a very diverse fleet everything from small inshore vessels right up to big modern trawlers.

SFM: I mean I thought I'd ask since we are recording this on International Woman's Day [2020], how your role has been, how has it felt as a woman and for maybe women you come across in your day-to-day life as part of your role?

EM: Yeah, it's interesting. We sometimes get calls from the media saying, "Oh we would really like to do some filming of women fisher, fisherwomen, you know, can you put us in touch with people?" And sadly, in our membership we can't because we don't actually have women at the sharp end in our fleet, in our membership catching fish. But my goodness, there is a lot of really

important women in the industry. They might not be the ones at the sharp end catching fish but there are really talented, clever, successful women right across the industry through the supply chain and processing, in the markets, in government bodies that we work with, in research and science. A huge range of women, really critically important to the industry's success. So, it would be great to see maybe more women fishing, and I think probably in some parts of the country there will be some out there, but it's primarily a male dominated workplace, I think, in terms of being at sea but, as I say, women are crucially important to the industry.

SFM: Thank you, so what can people listening to this podcast do to play their part either in, on the sustainability side and supporting the Scottish fishing industry?

EM: Em, I think, I would really encourage people to eat more fish. Now I would say that since wouldn't I because I represent a large chunk of the catching sector? But also I spent twenty years of my working life, before this job, working in food in food safety and food standards and trying to improve the Scottish diet and it always was disappointing to us that Scotland does not meet its dietary goals in fish consumption. And it's a great product: it's good for you, it's a really low carbon-footprint source of protein, it's sustainably managed. If we eat our own produce it can have really short food miles. So, I think the way in which I would encourage people to really support our industry is to really enjoy and embrace the huge range of fantastic food that our industry provides.

SFM: And then, sort of, well yeah you said about the carbon miles, but then I guess there's the argument of the overfishing side. How do you feel about the people that present that argument?

EM: Well I think it is important to recognise that fish stocks are managed through internationally developed scientific advice and through international processes which we have shared stocks etc. And around 60% of the stocks that we are involved with are fished at sustainable levels. I think there certainly have been times in the past where overfishing has been a problem and stocks have suffered as a consequence, but I think that has changed very significantly in the time that I've, when I worked with this industry twenty odd years ago and coming back to where we are today there has been, I think a real sea change.

And it's interesting again walking round the museum, you get a sense of how important families are in this industry and that really continues to be the case. We've still got generations of families involved in the industry and they want that industry to be sustainable for the future. So, I think there has been a sea change, I think we've come a very long way in fisheries management, and we want our fish stocks to be sustainable, so the industry is successful for the future.

SFM: So where do you personally see, the seas in 50 years' time?

EM: Em, well I think they will continue to be busy places because as we were speaking about earlier there's an increasing range of activities that are going on in our seas. What I would really like to see in the future is well managed, sustainable marine resources, where fishing is very much part of that. A successful and thriving fishing industry, fishing on sustainable well-managed stocks. And actually, with the changes that are coming through leaving the Common Fisheries Policy and the opportunity to develop a modern fisheries management programme for Scotland and the rest of the UK, we've actually got a, probably once in a lifetime, opportunity to design a really good system for the future so that's what we must do.

SFM: So, I'm guessing, sort of, that's more in the future of your role. I mean you have only been in for seven months, so how do you see, what's your sort of main goals for the future of your role so far?

EM: The big focus this year is about continuing to make the case for why we need to control access to the UK's Exclusive Economic Zone. Controlling access to our waters is the ace in the pack in terms of sustainable management of our fisheries and also working both with the UK government and with the Scottish government to design and develop that fisheries management system for the future. We are very busy on the first stage of that at the moment and started to develop the first Fisheries Bill that there will have been in the UK since the advent of the Common Fisheries Policy, so really designing a new regulatory and management system for the future - so that's very exciting.

SFM: So, I think we are almost done. I'll sort of end with a maybe light-hearted or maybe still quite a difficult question. If you could pick, is there a favourite part of your job?

EM: Em, that's interesting. I like all of it because I like variety and it's a really varied job. I think one of the things I really like about it is that I have a lot of contact with people who are very practically involved with the industry. It's easy to sit in an office and think you understand things, but actually you have to go out, you have to talk to people, you have to hear what it's *really* like at the sharp end, at the coal face if you like, and actually I love going out and seeing vessels and just being, messing about on boats, great.

SFM: Do you think your members really appreciate the fact you do take the time and effort to go and sort of see what they are actually doing first-hand?

EM: I hope they do. I very much hope they do, and I actually do think they value the fact that you make an effort to understand and make an effort to ask them what they care about and what they are worried about and what I can do to help. So, I think that's a really important part of the job.

SFM: That's great to hear. Thank-you so much for coming on to the podcast to speak to us. It's been really interesting to hear all about your work and as it's only in the early stages, I'm sure you can make a massive impact in the future.

EM: Well I hope so, that's - I am hoping that we go into the future with a really good management system for the future that really works to protect our industry and protect our stocks.

SFM: Thank-you so much.

EM: Thank-you, it has been very good, I've enjoyed it, thank-you.

SFM: Thanks for listening to Sea Change, the Scottish Fisheries Museum podcast series that accompanies our exhibition of the same name running from the 24th of January to the 21st of June 2020. We hope that this series has been both informative and enjoyable and has given you plenty of food for thought on the future of our seas.