



SCIENTIFIC COUNCIL MEETING – SEPTEMBER 2001
(Deep-sea Fisheries Symposium – Oral)

The Rockall Trough, North East Atlantic: an Account of the Change from one of the Best studied Deep-water Ecosystems to one that is Being Subjected to Unsustainable Fishing Activity.

by

J.D.M. Gordon

Scottish Association for Marine Science, Dunstaffnage Marine Laboratory, Oban, PA34 4RF, Scotland
Kingdom. e-mail: jdmg@dml.ac.uk

Abstract

The Rockall Trough or Channel is a clearly delimited deepwater area lying to the west of the British Isles. The eastern and western boundaries are formed by the continental margin and the Rockall Plateau, respectively. To the north it is separated from the colder Norwegian Sea by a ridge at about 500 m depth. To the south the depth steadily increases to abyssal depths. Some of the earliest descriptions of deep-water fishes are from this area in the 1860s and 1870s. The UK and Germany carried out deep-water exploratory fishing surveys in the 1970s and 1980s and detailed biological studies by the Scottish Association for Marine Science began in 1975.

Although some deep-water fishing began in the 1970s the rapid increase in commercial exploitation did not begin until 1989. As a result there is information on the fish populations and their biology that pre-date the fishery. Since then several countries have carried out research surveys in the area and there has been some monitoring of landings and discards.

There are documented concerns about the vulnerability of the fish stocks since 1993 and ICES considers them to be outside safe biological limits. The most recent ICES advice is for a 50% reduction in fishing effort for the main species. Despite ICES advice the fishery remains unregulated.

This paper describes the transition from what is probably one of the best-studied deep-water ecosystems to an area that is being subjected to unsustainable exploitation of its fish populations.

1. The Rockall Trough

Rockall is a granite rock with a base of about 25 m and a height of about 19 m lying about 200 m west of the Hebrides (Anon, 1974). It is not known when it was first discovered but Anon (1974) states that the first authenticated landing was in 1911. Blacker (1982) comments that fishing had probably been taking place on the surrounding bank for more than two centuries. Possession of the rock was claimed for the UK in 1955 and in 1972 it was incorporated into the UK. The original objective was military but later its ownership had economic significance when a 200-mile exclusive fishery zone was declared around the rock in the 1976. Greenpeace occupied the rock in 1997 as part of their campaign against oil exploration and later that year the UK, while continuing to claim ownership of the rock, renounced its claim to a 200-mile fishery zone. The consequences of this for deep-water fisheries will be described in Section 9. The development of the shallower water fisheries on the Rockall Bank was described by Blacker (1982).

Maury's first bathymetric chart of the North Atlantic of 1854 (reproduced in Murray and Hjort, 1912) shows the first indication that an area of deep water, subsequently to be known as the Rockall Trough or Channel, laid between the Rockall Bank and the Hebrides. Several expeditions surveyed the deep-water areas to the west of Scotland and Ireland and around the Faroe Islands (see Section 2) with the result that the map compiled by John Murray in 1911 clearly shows the Rockall Trough very much in the form that we know it today (Murray and Hjort, 1912). Figure 1 shows the modern bathymetry of the Rockall Trough. The northern boundary of the Rockall Trough is formed by the Wyville Thomson Ridge at a depth of about 500 m. This is a major faunal barrier and there is little similarity between the deep-water fish assemblages on either side of the ridge. To the west and northwest, the Rockall Trough is separated from the Icelandic basin by the Rockall Plateau and a chain of northern banks. To the south the Rockall Trough gradually increases in depth and eventually merges with the abyssal plain. The Porcupine Bank, which lies to the west of Ireland, has a steep slope where it forms an eastern boundary of the Rockall Trough. However, lying to the south of the Bank is an area with more gentle slopes, the Porcupine Seabight, which is sometimes considered as a separate entity, but for the purposes of this review it is considered as part of the Rockall Trough.

The underlying geology of the Rockall Trough has been described by Scrutton (1986) and the resulting structure of the continental margin by Jones *et al.*, (1986). Most of the area is covered with sediments whose deposition has been modified by volcanic activity, bottom currents and glacial processes.

2. 19th Century Explorations in deep-water biological oceanography

The deep waters to the west of the British Isles have played an important role in the field of biological oceanography. In the 1844 Edward Forbes published his work on the depth distribution of animal life and proposed his Azoic Theory, which suggested that there was no animal life below about 300 fathoms (550 m) (Forbes 1844). Although, as described by Currie (1986), there were occasional reports of life in waters deeper than this it was not until the cruises of the *Lightning* and *Porcupine* to the west of the British Isles in 1868 and 1869 that the theory was finally disproved (Thomson 1873). Interesting accounts of these and other early oceanographic vessels and their work are to be found in Rice (1986). The *Lightning*, a 126 foot wooden paddle gun vessel, was loaned by the Navy to Wyville Thomson and Carpenter to investigate the deep waters to the west and the north of the Hebrides. The *Lightning* sailed from Oban on 8 August 1868 and after many problems, not least the poor weather, succeeded in dredging and recovering living animals from depths of over 900 m to the southeast of the Faroe Islands. Later in the cruise another dredge haul at a similar depth, but further to the south, yielded a much richer catch. The bottom temperature at the first two stations was close to zero while at the latter it was 6.4°C. The vessel made one further deep haul in about 1190 m to the west of the Hebrides before returning to Oban.

In the following year H.M.S. *Porcupine*, a 141-foot long, wooden paddle vessel, was loaned by the Navy and made three exploratory voyages. The first cruise covered a wide area to the west of Ireland, the Porcupine Bank, the Rockall Trough and the Rockall Bank. Dredging was carried out at depths down to 2700 m. The second cruise searched for deeper water to the southwest of Ireland and recovered living material from a depth of 4289 m. The third voyage returned to an area where the *Lightning* had discovered warm and cold water deep-water areas between Scotland and the Faroe Islands in the previous year. The *Porcupine* confirmed that substantial temperature changes occurred over relatively short distances. In his accounts of these cruises Wyville Thomson (Thomson, 1873) notes that only a small number of fishes were caught by the dredges.

Following the round the world expedition of HMS *Challenger* between 1872 to 1876, there was renewed interest in the deep-waters to the west of the British Isles, and in particular to the separation of cold and warm water between Scotland and the Faroe Islands. This resulted in the cruises of the *Knight Errant* and the *Triton* in 1880 and 1882 respectively. Soundings by the *Knight Errant* established the existence of an underwater ridge separating the warm and cold water but the amount of biological sampling was limited. The *Triton* continued the work under the direction of John Murray and carried out hydrographic and biological surveys around the ridge. Preliminary lists of the fish from the cold and warm water areas from these cruises and the earlier *Lightning* and *Porcupine* cruise have been given by (Murray, 1886). The underwater ridge separating the relatively warm Atlantic waters from the cold Norwegian Basin water was subsequently named the Wyville Thomson Ridge (Deacon, 1977). All 88 fish caught by the *Knight Errant* and the *Triton* were included by Gunther (1887) in his account of the fishes of the *Challenger* expedition. Ten new fish species were added to the British fauna from the Faroe/Shetland Channel.

In 1885 the Royal Irish Academy appointed a committee to investigate the marine fauna within the 100-fathom line off southwest Ireland (Went, 1971/72a). The first expedition using the *Lord Bandon* succeeded in dredging to 220 m. In 1886 the *Lord Bandon* was again chartered for another expedition. After failures to dredge as deep as 2010 m a successful dredge was achieved at 594 m. Trawling was also successful at 265 fathoms. In 1888 the Royal Irish Academy chartered the *Flying Falcon* (formerly the *Lord Bandon*) and carried out trawling cruise at depths down to over 1800 m. Relatively few deep-water fishes were collected during these surveys (Scharff, 1890)

The Royal Dublin Society promoted a survey of the fishing grounds to the west of Ireland and with government aid chartered the steam yacht *Fingal* in 1890 and the *Harlequin* in 1891 (Went 1971/72b). Although most of the survey work was on the shelf some deep trawls were also carried out. An account of the fish catches is given by Holt (1892) and subsequently Holt and Calderwood (1895) described the rarer and deeper fishes collected.

Although the present paper is primarily concerned with fish it should be noted that benthic invertebrates were also collected on the cruises of the *Lightning*, *Porcupine*, *Knight Errant* and *Triton* (Gage 1986). Accounts of the early explorations of the pelagic fauna are to be found in the *Reports on the Sea and Inland Fisheries of Ireland* (Mauchline, 1986a)

3. 20th Century explorations of deep-water fishes

The Fisheries Branch of the Department of Agriculture and Technical Instruction for Ireland was established in 1899 and took over the role of the Royal Dublin Society. Investigations of the deep-water fishes continued under the direction of E.W.L. Holt using the *Helga*. There were in fact two vessels of that name (Rice, 1986). The first was a 145 foot long steel twin-screw steam yacht whose primary role was fisheries protection. For deep-water sampling she used a beam trawl not exceeding 35 foot and was limited by the amount of warp to fishing down to about 900 m (Holt and Byrne, 1906). The second 'Helga' was 155 feet long and was commissioned in 1908 (Green, 1908/09). Her principal role was fishery protection but she was also equipped for biological sampling with both trawl and hydrographic winches. From the account and station data given by Farran (1924) it appears that this Helga used the same trawl and was able to sample to depths of about 700 m.

These investigations recorded the distribution of deep-water fishes to the west of Ireland and resulted in descriptions of many new species. Despite the relatively simple equipment available at that time it is remarkable that these investigations described the fish fauna of the slope west of Ireland in considerable detail and the resulting series of publications are a valuable source of information (Farran, 1924; Holt and Byrne, 1906,1908a,b, 1909, 1910a,b, 1911, 1913).

In 1910 the Norwegian research vessel *Michael Sars* carried out an exploratory survey of the Wyville Thomson Ridge and Murray and Hjørt (1912) comment on the differences in the fish fauna on either side of the ridge determined from this and earlier cruises.

The next investigation of the deep-waters was carried out by the Fisheries Laboratory of the UK Ministry of Agriculture Fisheries and Food (MAFF). The steam-trawler *Florence Brierley* carried out 118 bottom trawls at depths ranging from about 160 to 1025 m (Hickling 1928) The main objective was to survey the *Merluccius merluccius* (hake) populations but notes were kept on all the other fish species caught. The areas sampled were the Faroe-Shetland Channel from the Wyville Thomson Ridge eastwards, the Scottish Atlantic Slope from the Wyville Thomson Ridge south to Tory Island and the Rockall Bank. A total of 61 species were recorded and their distribution between the three areas is discussed. There was considerable similarity between the deep-catches of the Scottish slope and the Rockall Bank but those from the cold deep water of the Faroe-Shetland Channel were markedly different. The quantity of fish from a standard tow in the Faroe-Shetland Channel was also much less than that at corresponding depths on the Scottish slope.

The MAFF carried out further exploratory surveys in 1960 and 1961 at several locations to the west of Ireland and also at Rockall and George Bligh Banks. The main purpose was to search for new grounds for commercially viable fisheries and for this purpose about 280 bottom trawls were carried out between depths of 90 and 620 m (Blacker, 1962). Blacker records the distribution of 107 species and comments on some of the rarer and more unusual species. The gradual extension of national fishery limits to 200 miles resulted in renewed interest in the potential of the deeper waters of the continental slopes to the west of the British Isles. Six exploratory voyages were undertaken in

1973-74, four by the MAFF's FRV *Cirolana* and two by commercial trawlers chartered by the White Fish Authority (now Seafish Industry Authority) on behalf of MAFF. The area covered extended along the slope from about 50° N to 60° N and also onto the slopes of many of the offshore banks including Rockall, Hatton, George Bligh, Rosemary, Lousy, Bill Bailey and the west of Faroe Bank. The fishing strategy of the research vessel cruises was to carry out four trawls at each locality at depths of approximately 300, 400, 500 and 600 fathoms (549, 732, 914 and 1097 m). The charter vessel *Swanella* concentrated its survey on the more northerly areas of the slope and some offshore banks, which had yielded the most promising results (McDiarmid, 1974a). The other charter vessel, the *Luneda*, concentrated on only two areas which were among those considered to be the most productive, namely the Tory ground (approx. 55° N) and the Flannan ground (58° 30'N) (McDiarmid, 1974b). A total of 286 trawl hauls were made and Bridger (1978) has published an account of the trawls used, the grounds fished, the overall catch rates and has described some aspects of the biology of some of species. These surveys represent a valuable source of information on the fish populations, which pre-date the commercial exploitation. With the assistance of funding from the European Commission (EC) these data, together with data from a later 1978 survey, have been re-analysed by Gordon and Swan (1997a). The highest catch rates were on the eastern slopes of the Rockall Trough between about 54 and 57° N (mostly ICES Sub-area VI). The proportion of the catch that comprises what Bridger termed trash fish (species unlikely to be marketable) was greater on the slopes to the west of Ireland. The slopes off southwest Ireland (mainly ICES Sub-area VII) were also much more difficult to fish and Bridger states that "no commercial skipper would have stayed for more than a couple of hauls at most".

The former Federal Republic of Germany also carried out many surveys for deep-water resources in northeastern Atlantic. A total of 12 cruises of the 'Walther Herwig' were carried out between 1974 and 1986 in the Rockall Trough and on the slopes of its surrounding banks. More than 1000 stations were fished with commercial bottom trawls at depths between 200 and 1200 m in areas where the bottom topography was suitable. Occasionally trawling was carried out at greater depths (Merrett *et al.*, 1991a). Ehrich (1983) has published information on catch rates and biological parameters of the seven species that he considered to be of commercial or potentially commercial importance. These species were *Coryphaenoides rupestris* (roundnose grenadier), *Argentina silus* (greater argentine), *Chimaera monstrosa* (rabbit fish), *Molva dypterygia* (blue ling), *Aphanopus carbo* (black scabbardfish), *Hoplostethus atlanticus* (orange roughy) and *Micromesistius poutassou* (blue whiting). He carried out separate analyses of the data from the Rockall area (north of 53° N) and what he called the Biscay Area (south of 53° N). In the Rockall area the above species comprised most of the biomass while in the Biscay area not only was the total biomass less but the selected species made up less of that biomass. In a more general study of the total catch data for all species Rätz (1984) divided the area into three and gives pooled abundance and biomass data for each area by 100 m depth intervals. He also used multivariate techniques to analyse the total catch data in an attempt to identify areas or depths with particular characteristics (see Section 5). Until recently much of the biological data on non-target species was only in notebook form. However, as a contribution to the EC FAIR Deep-fisheries Project (Gordon, 1999, 2001a) most of these data have been extracted and archived in a database.

Following the commissioning of the oceanographic research vessel RRS *Challenger* in 1973, the Scottish Association for Marine Science (SAMS) (formerly the Scottish Marine Biological Association (SMBA)) began a deep-water research programme in the Rockall Trough. The deep-water fishing surveys of the continental slope began in 1975 with a series of 5 cruises. These were multidisciplinary cruises of relatively short duration and fishing was limited to two Granton trawl hauls, at 750 and 1000 m, per cruise. The sampling area was the Hebridean Terrace, a large expanse of trawlable slope between about 56 -57° N and 08 - 10° W. One of the important aims of the SMBA survey was to investigate seasonal aspects of the biology of the deep-water species. A further 7 cruises between 1976 and 1979 used the same Granton trawl to sample at 500 and 1250 m as well as the standard 750 and 1000 m hauls. Additional material was also collected over a much wider depth range using a small 8 fathom box trawl fished on a single warp and a 3 m Agassiz trawl. Full details of the trawls, the station positions and catches for all stations down to 2000 m are given in Gordon and Swan (1993) and an overview of the general fish ecology is given in Gordon and Duncan (1985a)

In 1978 the UK Institute of Oceanography (IOS) began an investigation of the benthos of the Porcupine Seabight off the southwest of Ireland (Rice *et al.*, 1991). SAM and IOS collaborated on a detailed study of the fish populations of the Seabight using a semi-balloon shrimp trawl fished on a single warp and the same Granton trawl as was used by SAMS in the Rockall Trough on the upper slopes. Between 1978 and 1983 a total of 40 Granton trawls (260 -1285 m) and 133 semi-balloon trawls (138-4587 m) were carried out. A description of the gears and the ecology of the fish populations of the Porcupine Sea Bight resulting from this survey has been published (Merrett *et al.*, 1991a,b).

Between 1983 and 1987 SAMS returned to work in the Rockall Trough and the Granton trawl was used for the last time to fish two stations at 250 m depth. The main emphasis of the work changed to using semi-balloon trawl, rigged on either a single or on paired warps, to sample a much wider depth range of the slopes of the Rockall Trough. Some experiments, in conjunction with the Marine Biological Association of the UK, to investigate the effects of attaching artificial lights to the headline of the trawl were also carried out in 1984 and 1985 (Pascoe, 1990; Gordon *et al.*, submitted). The surveys resumed with a new series of six joint benthic/fishing cruises to the Rockall Trough between 1990 and 1992. The main emphasis of the fish work was on collecting otoliths for studies on age determination. In 1999 the opportunity was taken to carry out some repeat hauls at 1000 m depth on the Hebridean Terrace which complements a similar, pre-fishery series made using the same gear and ship as in 1985. This was the last fishing cruise of RRS *Challenger* before she was decommissioned.

As a result of all the SAMS studies in the Rockall Trough between 1975 and 1979, again between 1983 and 1992 and finally in 1999, there are now complete catch data for 41 Granton trawls, 31 box trawls, 95 semi-balloon trawls fished on both single and paired warps and 73 Agassiz trawls.

In recent years deep-water surveys to the Rockall Trough have been carried out by the Fisheries Research Services (FRS), Marine Laboratory, Aberdeen. Six cruises between 1996 and 2000 either investigated the behaviour of fishing gears in deep-water or carried out dedicated deep-water fishery surveys. Some opportunistic deep-water trawling has also been carried out on other FRS surveys, for example, in support of a project on anglerfish (Gordon 2001b).

Although France carried out some deep-water fishing surveys in the northern part of Rockall Trough in the 1960s little information has been published. In 1996 the new research vessel *Thalassa* carried out a deep-water trawling survey on the Hebridean Terrace. This particular area having been chosen to build on the long time-series of SAMS data from the same area (Allain and Kergoat, 1997; Lorange 1998). A total of 19 valid tows were carried out at depth ranges between 700 and 1750 m (Allain, 1999). *Thalassa* returned to the same area in 1999 and a further 34 hauls were carried out between at depths between 1000 and 2000 m (Lorange, Pers. Comm).

In 1993 the Irish Marine Institute (Fisheries Research Centre) began a series of deep-water surveys using a chartered commercial trawler (Connolly and Kelly, 1994). The main objective was to sample selected species for biological studies. In November 1995 comparisons were made between the catch and discards of a commercial bottom trawl and longlines (Connolly and Kelly, 1996a,b). The sampling area extended along the continental slope between 58° 30' N and 54° N at depths between 740 and 1400 m. Another trawl survey was carried out in the same area in September 1996 for biological sampling and the estimation of discards (Kelly *et al.*, 1997a). A further survey was carried out in 1997 and longline surveys in 1997 and 1999 (Clarke, 1999; Connolly *et al.*, 1999). More recently, beginning in March 2000, the Bord Iascaigh Mhara (BIM) initiated a two year programme of deep-water trials using trawler and longliners that incorporates scientific data collection.

Some exploratory fishing has been carried out by former USSR in the international sector of the northern Rockall Trough and Hatton Bank (Vinnichenko, 2000)

Parts of the northern Rockall Trough and the Wyville Thomson Ridge lie within the Faroese EEZ. The Fisheries Laboratory has in the last two decades carried out exploratory surveys using bottom trawl, longlines, tangle nets and pots (Reinert, 1995).

Norway has traditionally fished by longline along the edge of the continental shelf and onto the upper slope for blue ling (*Molva dypterygia*), ling (*Molva molva*) and tusk (*Brosme brosme*). In 1991 an experimental longline surveys were undertaken in deep water along the continental slope to the west of the Hebrides (Olsen, 1995; Stene and Buner, 1991). Two stations were within the Rockall Trough, one on the Anton Dorn Bank at depths between 548-684 m and the other on the continental slope to the west of St Kilda at depths between 475-1097 m. Information on the catches is given by Stene and Bunner (1991).

From the above account of the surveys of the 20th Century, especially since the 1970s, and building on the explorations of the late 19th and early 20th centuries it is clear that the deep-water fish populations of the Rockall Trough must be amongst the most studied of any ocean. The earliest surveys had a very strong bias toward ichthyology and it is equally a concern that some of the later, mainly fisheries orientated, surveys of the 20th century

lacked ichthyological experience and as a result some total catch data may be incomplete or inaccurate. Nevertheless, at the species level, and especially for those that are either being exploited or have the potential for exploitation, there are numerous data on geographical and depth ranges, abundance, length frequency distributions, seasonal/annual variations in distribution and catch rates. The interpretation of all the information from these surveys must take into account the fishing gear employed. More detailed considerations of this and also the biology and ecology of the fish species will be dealt with in Section 5.

4. Other physical and biological oceanographical investigations. (excluding fish and fisheries)

A symposium on the oceanography of the Rockall Channel was held in 1985 and the proceedings, which cover a wide range of topics, were published in 1986 (Mauchline, 1986b). Included in this volume is a detailed bibliography of the Rockall Trough (Mauchline *et al.* 1986).

Gage (2001) has summarised the studies of the deep-sea benthic environment of the Rockall Trough. The more recent studies were initiated in 1973 by Gage and co-workers at SAMS as part of multi-disciplinary study of the Rockall Trough. A time series centred on two permanent stations at 2200 and 2900 m with opportunistic sampling at other locations and depths.

The Atlantic Frontier Environmental Network (AFEN) is a consortium of oil operators established in 1995 who have collaborated with academic bodies and institutions to carry out widespread environmental assessments of the area to the west of Scotland, including the Rockall Trough, where oil exploration might occur. An account of the scope of the investigations carried out under the auspices of AFEN is to be found in a special issue of *Continental Shelf Research* (Mordue, 2001). Individual oil companies have also been carrying out their own environmental impact assessments in the Rockall Trough (e.g. Jones, 1998).

The UK Natural Environment Research Council (NERC) funded a Land Ocean Interaction Study (LOIS) a component of which was a Shelf Edge Study (SES) carried out on the Hebridean Terrace in the Rockall Trough (Mitchell *et al.*, 1997).

A study of the biogeochemistry in the deep ocean benthic boundary (BENBO) was also funded by the NERC between 1997 and 2000 (Black, 2001; Black *et al.*, 2001). The general aim of the project was to investigate the physical, chemical and biological processes occurring in a relatively undisturbed marine environment. Two of the study sites were within the Rockall Trough, one at the entrance at a depth of 3580 m and another in the northwest at 1920 m.

5. Biology and ecology of deep-water fishes

There have been numerous studies of the biology and ecology of the deep-water fishes of the Rockall Trough. As the commercial fishery has developed the emphasis has increasingly changed to studies on target species. The following account is not intended to be a comprehensive bibliography but simply an indication of some of the important results. The publications cited should enable the interested reader to source further information.

5.1 General ecological accounts

An overview of some of the key questions concerning environmental and biological aspects of slope dwelling fishes that utilises many examples from the Rockall Trough is to be found in Gordon *et al.* (1995).

The first attempt to examine the structure of the fish assemblages of the Rockall Trough was by Rätz (1984). Using cluster analysis on a sub-set of the German survey data (8 cruises between 1979 and 1983) he showed that the 298 hauls could be grouped into 11 clusters with geographical location and depth being the main determinants. Later, using the full German data set, Stehmann (EC Deep-fisheries Project, Gordon, 1999) recognised eight sub-areas in the Rockall Trough and its immediate surroundings. These sub-areas were defined in relation to the topography, the sea floor substrate and its associated benthic fauna and the hydrography. Only five of these areas were truly in the Rockall Trough. Depth distribution, abundance and other biological parameters were described in relation to these areas.

These studies had the advantage of only using one type of bottom trawl (a second smaller trawl of similar design was used occasionally). In the SAMS surveys in the northern Rockall Trough several quite different trawls were used between 1975 and 1992 and the differences in catch composition between them were quite evident. Some preliminary comparisons of catch composition between gears were given by Gordon and Duncan (1985a) and Gordon (1986). Later Gordon and Bergstad (1992) used multivariate analysis to compare the catches of three different otter trawls. Depth, followed by net type, were the most important factors determining the catch composition and abundance. The greatest difference between gears was in the catch of the smallest trawl, which was fished on a single warp. This gear was less effective at catching the larger more mobile species, such as sharks, and yielded large catches of the small synphobranchid eel, *Synphobranchus kaupi*. Similar comparisons of trawl catch composition in relation to fishing gear were carried out in the Porcupine Seabight (Merrett *et al.*, 1991a). Gordon *et al.* (1996) compared the catch composition by gear type and bathymetric zone between the Rockall Trough and the Porcupine Seabight.

Connolly and Kelly (1996a) compared the differences in catch composition and catch rates between trawl and longline. The longline catches of the Rockall Trough tend to be dominated by elasmobranchs and the gadiform fishes

Although this review is primarily concerned with demersal fishes the publications on the mesopelagic fishes by Kawaguchi and Mauchline (1982, 1987) provide a source of information on these families. Merrett *et al.* (1986) used large pelagic trawls both in the water column and over the slope at depths between 100 and 1000 m. Demersal species made only a small contribution to the catches.

5.2 Main target species

Molva dypterygia (blue ling)

Although it was the exploitation of *M. dypterygia* that was one of the key factors in the development of the recent deep-water trawl fishery of the Rockall Trough, there have been relatively few biological studies on the species. The results of a Nordic study on *Molva molva* (ling), *M. dypterygia* and *Brosme brosme* (tusk) in the northeast Atlantic, including the Rockall Trough, are given by Bergstad and Hareide (1996) and Magnússon *et al.* (1997). Age estimation, especially of the adults, is difficult but progress is being made (Bergstad *et al.*, 1998). German studies in the Rockall Trough are described by Ehrich (1983) and in adjacent areas by Thomas (1987). UK studies include those by Bridger (1978), Gordon and Swan (1993; 1997a). The diet was described by Mauchline and Gordon (1984a)

Coryphaenoides rupestris (roundnose grenadier)

General accounts of survey abundance, length frequency and depth distributions of *C. rupestris* are given by Bridger (1978), Ehrich (1983), Gordon (1979a) and Gordon and Swan (1993; 1997a). The age and growth of this species has been described by Gordon (1978); Kelly *et al.* (1997b); Allain and Lorange (2000) and Lorange *et al.* (2001). Ages of juvenile fish were validated by Gordon and Swan (1996) and Swan and Gordon (2001). The reproduction has been the subject of studies by Kelly *et al.* (1996) and Allain (2001). The diet in the Rockall Trough was described by Mauchline and Gordon (1984b)

Aphanopus carbo (black scabbardfish)

General accounts of survey abundance, length frequency and depth distributions of *A. carbo* are given by Bridger (1978), Ehrich (1983) and Gordon and Swan (1993, 1997a). Unvalidated age estimates of fish caught off Madeira suggest a faster growth rate than many other deep-water species (Morales-Nin and Sena-Carvalho, 1995). Similar results, including some from the Rockall Trough, were obtained from a recent European Commission Study Contract *Environment and biology of deep-water species, Aphanopus carbo* (Lowe, 1839) in NE Atlantic: basis for its management (BASBLACK) (Santos, 2000; Morales-Nin *et al.*, submitted). The diet has been described by Mauchline and Gordon, (1984c). The eggs and early juveniles of this species are unknown and the fish in the Rockall Trough were all immature sub-adults.

Hoplostethus atlanticus (orange roughy)

General accounts of survey abundance, length frequency and depth distributions of *H. atlanticus* are given by Bridger (1978), Ehrich (1983), and Gordon and Swan (1993, 1997a), although some of the data in Bridger (1978) are incorrect because some catches of *H. atlanticus* were ascribed to a different species. The identification problem has now been resolved (Merrett and Wheeler, 1983). None of these surveys encountered the large spawning aggregations that typify the global fisheries for this species although some large catches around the Rosemary Bank were reported by a German commercial trawler in 1979 (Freytag, 1979). *H. atlanticus* is the most quoted example of a long-lived, >100 y, deep-water fish although the age estimates are not without controversy (Tracy and Horn, 1999). Ages estimated from both whole and sectioned otoliths from the Rockall Trough suggest a similar longevity to the South Pacific stocks (Allain and Lorange, 2000). Gordon and Duncan (1987a) have described aspects of the biology of *H. atlanticus* and *H. mediterraneus* in the Rockall Trough and Mauchline and Gordon (1984c) described the diet. The spawning periodicity of *H. atlanticus* in the Rockall Trough has been described by Du Buit (1995). Some information on length at first maturity and fecundity is given in the report of the EC Deep-fisheries Project (Gordon, 1999a).

Exploited deep-water sharks; *Centroscymnus coelolepis* (Portuguese dogfish) and *Centrophorus squamosus* (Leaf scale gulper shark).

General accounts of survey abundance, length frequency and depth distributions of *C. coelolepis* and *C. squamosus* are given by Bridger (1978), Gordon and Swan (1993; 1997a,b). Age estimation in *C. squamosus* using the dorsal spines has been carried out by Clarke *et al.* (1998) and Clarke (2000a). Clarke (2000a), Girard and Du Buit (1999) and Girard *et al.* (2000a) have investigated aspects of the reproduction of both species. The diet has been described by Mauchline and Gordon (1983a)

5.3 Other species of minor commercial or no commercial value

The distribution and abundance of deep-water sharks in the Rockall Trough has been collated by Gordon and Swan (1997b) and Gordon (1999b). Data on length distributions of deep-water sharks and chimaerids are included in the study of their diet by Mauchline and Gordon (1983a). Gordon and Duncan (1989) have described the distribution and diet of the deep-water rays. Clarke (2000b) has described some of the rarer chondrichthyan fishes of the Rockall Trough.

The alepocephalid fishes are a dominant family in the Rockall Trough. *Alepocephalus bairdii* and *A. rostrata* are the dominant species although the latter is only abundant and at shallower depths in the southern part of the Trough. These species can comprise a high proportion of the catch that is discarded (see Section 6). The other species tend to be deeper living and in lower abundance with a greater number of species in southern areas (c.f. Gordon and Duncan, 1985a; Gordon, 1986; Merrett *et al.*, 1991a,b). Allain and Lorange (2000) and Allain (2001) have described the age and growth and the reproduction of *A. bairdii*. The diets of the upper slope species have been described by Mauchline and Gordon (1983b).

Argentina silus is exploited in a semi-pelagic fishery and aspects of its biology in the north-eastern Atlantic are described by Wood and Raitt (1968). Ehrich (1983) described the distribution and abundance in the Rockall Trough. Heessen and Kuitert (1991) have described aspects of the biology including age and reproduction and Mauchline and Gordon (1983b) have described the diet.

There are several species of deep-water eels in the Rockall Trough but *Synaphobranchus kaupii* and at abyssal depths, *Histiobranchus bathybius* are the only abundant species. *S. kaupii* has a very wide depth distribution and in surveys using fine meshed trawls is the most abundant species in the Rockall Trough (Gordon and Bergstad, 1992; Gordon *et al.*, 1996 and Merrett *et al.*, 1991a). Gordon and Mauchline (1996) have described the distribution and diet in the Rockall Trough.

The notacanthid fishes (spiny eels), especially *Notacanthus bonapartei* and *Polyacanthonotus rissoanus* can be abundant at certain depths. Their biology has been described by Coggan *et al.* (1998).

The macrourid fishes are the most diverse and among the most abundant of the fishes of the Rockall Trough. *Coryphaenoides rupestris* has been described above. Gordon (1979b,c) gives some preliminary information on their reproduction. The biology of *Nezumia aequalis* was described by Coggan *et al.* (1999). The diet of the macrourid fishes of the Rockall Trough was described by Mauchline and Gordon (1984b) and for some of the deeper living species by Gordon and Duncan (1987b). The latter paper also gives some data on the seasonality of reproduction, especially for *Coryphaenoides guentheri*. Swan and Gordon (2001) have estimated ages of juvenile macrourids and for some species have validated these ages using marginal increment analysis.

The gadid fishes tend to be associated with the upper slope. The information on *Molva molva* and *Brosme brosme* has recently been collated by Bergstad and Hareide (1996) and Magnússon *et al.* (1997). *Micromesistius poutassou* is a deep-water semi-pelagic species, which is heavily exploited along the margins of the Rockall Trough. Its biology was described by Bailey (1982) and more recent updates of its fishery related biology can be found in the reports of the ICES Advisory Committee for Fisheries Management (ACFM) (e.g. Anon 2001a). The diets of the gadid fishes, including *Phycis blennoides* (greater forkbeard), have been described by Mauchline and Gordon (1984a). The biology of the closely related morid fishes have been investigated by Gordon and Duncan (1985b) and their diets by Mauchline and Gordon (1980, 1984a).

Aspects of the age, growth and reproduction of the scorpaenid, *Helicolenus dactylopterus* (bluemouth), have been described by Kelly *et al.*, 1999) and the reproduction by Allain (2001). Allain and Lorange (2000) have also estimated the age of this species.

There have been many studies of the biology of the flatfishes *Lepidorhombus whiffiagonis* (megrin) and *L. boscii* (four spot megrim) in the neighbouring Celtic Sea. Aspects of their distribution, age composition and reproduction of *L. whiffiagonis* in the Rockall Trough have been investigated in a EC Project entitled *Distribution and Biology of anglerfish and megrim in the waters to the west of Scotland* (Gordon 2001b). The diet of *L. whiffiagonis* in the Rockall Trough has been described by (Du Buit 1984).

There are two species of anglerfish *Lophius piscatorius* and *L. budegassa* in the Rockall Trough but the former is much more abundant. They are generally considered to be shelf species but are now known to occur to depths of at least 1000 m. Detailed studies on *L. piscatorius* in both shallow and deep-water have been carried out during the EC project mentioned above (Gordon 2001b).

5.4 Trophic ecology

The above account of the more important studies on the fishes of the Rockall Trough does not adequately describe the work that has been done on the trophic ecology of the fishes. The diets of over 70 fish have been described in a series of papers (Coggan *et al.*, 1998; Gordon and Duncan, 1985b, 1987a b, 1989; Gordon and Mauchline 1996; Kawaguchi and Mauchline 1982, 1987; Mauchline and Gordon, 1980, 1983a b, 1984 a b c). The occurrence of stones, sediment and fish scales in the stomachs was described by Mauchline and Gordon (1984d) and the parasites by Mauchline and Gordon (1984e). Mauchline and Gordon (1985, 1986) investigated the trophic diversity and the foraging strategy of the deep-water fish assemblages. Gordon and Duncan 1987b constructed simple food webs for the fish assemblages at 2200 and 2900 m in the Rockall Trough. The general conclusion from all these studies of diet and feeding behaviour is that the demersal fish feed mainly on pelagic or benthopelagic prey rather than benthic organisms. Gordon and Mauchline (1990) showed how the different prey categories were apportioned according to the best estimates of total fish biomass by bathymetric zone. In the Rockall Trough total fish abundance and biomass tends to increase with increasing depth to peak at about 1000 to 1250 m depth and thereafter declines. The peak coincides with the peak in the mesopelagic biomass and the role of horizontal and vertical impingement of the mesopelagic fauna onto the slope as a food source for benthopelagic fishes has been discussed by (Mauchline and Gordon, 1991; and Gordon 2001c).

5.5 Trace metals and hydrocarbons

There have been a number of studies on the trace metals of the deep-water fishes of the Rockall Trough (Cronin *et al.*, 1998; Mormede and Davies, 1998, 2001a b; Vas, 1991; Vas and Gordon, 1988, 1993; Vas *et al.*, 1993). The levels of polychlorobiphenyl and pesticide residues in *Aphanopus carbo* and *Lophius piscatorius* from the Rockall Trough were determined by Mormede and Davies (2000, 2001c).

6. Deep-water fisheries

The development and current status of the deep-water fisheries of the Rockall Trough, based mainly on the reports of the ICES Study Group on the Biology and Assessment of Deep-sea Fishery Resources, have been reviewed by Gordon (2001c) and only a brief summary will be given here. The deep-water bottom trawl fisheries in the northeast Atlantic began in with the exploitation of *Coryphaenoides rupestris* and other species by Russian trawlers in the late 1960s. Most of the effort was probably south of Iceland and on the Reykjanes Ridge although some also occurred in the northern Rockall Trough (Pechenik and Troyanovsky, 1970). The Rockall Trough deep-water fishery began in the 1970s when German trawlers began to exploit spawning aggregations of *Molva dypterygia*. After a few years German interest decreased and the French fleet gradually moved into deeper waters and began to exploit *M. dypterygia*. In 1989 the French fishery increased as they began to develop markets for deep-water species such as *C. rupestris*, *Aphanopus carbo* and deep-water sharks (Charuau *et al.* 1995). The fishery continued to develop and gradually moved into deeper waters. It was the discovery of the high valued, *Hoplostethus atlanticus* in 1992 that probably brought the deep-water fishery to public attention and stimulated other nations to become involved. However, the fishery continues to be dominated by France. The main interest of the Scottish fleet is the exploitation of the high value anglerfish (*Lophius* spp.). Recently, Ireland has been renewing its fishing fleet and deep-water fisheries are expanding.

The semi-pelagic trawl fishery takes place mainly along the eastern slopes of the Rockall Trough and targets spawning aggregations of either *Micromesistius poutassou* or *Argentina silus*.

The static gear fisheries within the Rockall Trough are by longline and mainly comprise a Spanish and UK fleet targeting *Merluccius merluccius* with deep-water sharks as a by-catch and a Norwegian fleet targeting *Molva molva*, *M. dypterygia* and *Brosme brosme*.

The accuracy of landings data for deep-water species is a problem, especially if the reporting systems either did not have or still do not have the facility to record at the species level. However, as most of the deep-water landings from the Rockall Trough are from the French bottom trawl fishery there are good national records of landings.

The monitoring of landings of deep-water species from the Rockall Trough at the ports began at the start of the fishery and the EC Deep-fisheries Project became the focus for more comprehensive sampling. The following brief account is compiled from the Project report (Gordon, 1999a). France began to sample the landings of *Coryphaenoides rupestris* in 1990 and as a contribution to the Project routine monthly sampling of length composition of the landings from ICES Sub-areas VI and VII was carried out at the French port of Lorient. Otoliths were collected for age estimation. *Hoplostethus atlanticus* were sampled at the port of Boulogne sur mer, which complimented earlier sampling at the ports of Concarneau and Lorient. At the time of the Project the landings of the deep-water sharks, *Centrophorus squamosus* and *Centroscymnus coelolepis*, were combined as 'siki'. Monthly sampling at French ports, especially Concarneau, has determined the seasonal and annual proportions of the two species in the landings and provided information on length composition and sex ratio.

The Scottish sampling during the Project concentrated on the landings of French vessels at the Scottish port of Lochinver. A wide range of deep-water species were measured and weighed and otoliths were collected for age estimation. The weight measurements were particularly useful for calculating length-weight relationships, which are often lacking for deep-water species. Monthly sampling of the deep-water sharks is continuing as a contribution to a PhD Project (Crozier, 2001).

Data on the landings of deep-water species are generally reported by ICES Sub-areas or Divisions which were formulated for the assessment and management of shelf fisheries and which often have a political significance. These are mostly unsuitable for deep-water fisheries and these problems were recognised at the start of the Deep-fisheries Project. An alternative division of the ICES area into deep-water fishing zones based on topography and hydrography was proposed (Coggan, 1997) but was never implemented.

The Rockall Trough lies within ICES Sub-areas VI and VII and a part of Division Vb. However, landings data for Sub-area VI include those from the slopes to the west of the Rockall Bank and a part of the Hatton Bank (Division VIb). The remainder of the Hatton bank lies within Sub-area XII, a vast undivided area that extends westwards to

include the Mid-Atlantic Ridge. Large parts of Division VIb and XII are in international waters, the more so since the UK renounced its claim to a 200 mile fishery zone around Rockall in 1997. It is a concern that not all landings from international waters are being reported and that there may be mis-reporting between Sub-areas VI and XII (Anon., 2000a).

On a finer scale EU Logbooks contain data, which is reported by ICES Statistical, rectangles ($\frac{1}{2}$ degree of latitude and one degree of longitude) but the value of these data is diminished because depth is not recorded. It is possible for a statistical rectangle covering the shelf edge or in area of seamounts or underwater ridges to have a depth range of more than 1000 m.

With the exception of *Molva dypterygia*, over 90% of the landings from the deep-water trawl fisheries in the Rockall Trough are by French vessels that target different species at different depths throughout the year. Allain (1999) gives a good description of the French fleet and the evolution of the fishery. Different parts of the fleet have developed and declined in different ways, the efficiency of some sectors of the fleet has undoubtedly increased and there have been changes in target species as markets have developed. As a result it would be difficult to estimate a meaningful catch per unit of effort (CPUE) for the whole fleet. To overcome this problem Girard *et al.* (2000b) and Lorange and Dupouy (2001) sub-divided the fleet and used some assumptions to determine the directed effort on each species. It is the trends in CPUE indices for the sector of the fleet that has changed least since the start of the fishery that, in the absence of aged based data, has been used for stock assessment (see Section 7).

At any given depth on slope of the Rockall Trough a fine meshed, research trawl is likely to catch about 40 or 50 different species of benthopelagic fishes. A relatively small number of these species comprise most of the biomass (Gordon and Mauchline, 1990). Most of the marketable species are amongst the top ranking species in terms of biomass, but this depends on area and depth. The proportion of marketable species amongst the top ranking species tends to be less in the southern areas and at the greatest depths. The body shape (bulbous heads and elongate bodies) of deep-water fishes results in the retention of many immature fish by trawls that have codend mesh sizes appropriate for shelf fishes. Fish caught by the trawl and subsequently discarded will not survive. There were two studies of discarding in the Rockall Trough under the auspices of the EC Deep-fisheries Project. France carried out quarterly sampling of discards by placing observers on commercial trawlers that were targeting *C. rupestris* (Dupouy *et al.*, 1998). Three species dominated the discards; *Deania calceus* (birdbeak dogfish), *C. rupestris* and *Alepocephalus bairdii*. The *C. rupestris* discarded were the smaller individuals and accounted for about 30% by weight of the total catch of this species. Overall the total discard of all species was close to 50%. The Scottish discard sampling was carried out by placing observers on both Scottish and French trawlers (Blasdale and Newton, 1998). The composition of the discards and the discard rates differed between the two fleets which was mainly caused by differences in fishing depth. The Scottish fleet of smaller vessels tends to fish on the upper slope where *Lophius* is an important target species.

Many deep-water fishes have large scales and are not well endowed with mucus so that it is likely that most immature fish or fish of small adult size that enter the trawl and subsequently escape through the meshes will be badly damaged and will probably not survive. Gordon and Hunter (1994) described these fish as 'no-catch discards'. Gordon (1997) estimated that the escapees from commercial trawls could be as high as 66 to 86 % in terms of numbers and 10 and 45 % in terms of weight depending on fishing depth.

7. Assessment and status of the stocks

It was undoubtedly the unregulated development of the deep-water trawl fishery in the Rockall Trough that in 1992 led the Council of Fisheries Ministers of the European Union to initiate and support measures leading to a better understanding of deep-water fisheries (Gordon 1998). At the same time ICES also recognised the growing importance of these new fisheries and in 1994 inaugurated the ICES Study Group on the Biology and Assessment of Deep-sea Fishery Resources (SGDEEP), which has met in plenary every second year. The 1994 and 1996 meetings of the Study Group were mainly concerned with the collection of data (Anon., 1995a, 1996) and it was not until 1998 and again in 2000 that assessments were attempted. (Anon., 1998, 2000a). In 2001 the group became a Working Group (WGDEEP) and reported by correspondence (Anon., 2001c). In the absence of adequate age data these assessments were for the most part based on the time-series of CPUE, which, in the case of the Rockall Trough, were derived from a portion of the French fleet (see Section 6). Surplus production and modified DeLury models were used for some of the assessments. The methodology, results and the various caveats and assumptions

are described in another paper being presented at this symposium (Large *et al.*, 2001). The conclusion of the Study Group is that most of the deep-water species are being exploited at levels that are outside safe biological limits.

8. Fishing impacts

In general terms deep-water fishes have a high age at maturity and there is the suggestion that they may not achieve begin spawning until somatic growth has all but ceased (Gordon *et al.*, 1995). In the Rockall Trough the fishery only began increasing about 10 years ago and if, as often appears to be the case, maturity is not reached until an age of more than 10 years then the present catches are of fish that are the product of the almost unexploited, pre-fishery spawning stock. Because of their body shape many fish are caught and discarded before they reach maturity. The probable high mortality of even younger fish age caused by the damage sustained by escaping through the meshes will also have an effect on recruitment. The combination of these factors must mean that the decline in biomass will accelerate more rapidly than would be the case for a shelf stock

In the Rockall Trough abundance indices, expressed as CPUE, have declined by as much as 50% in five years for the principal deep-water species (Lorance and Dupouy, 2001). In addition to changes in abundance a new fishery on a virgin stock might be expected to result in changes in length composition and age/length at maturity. There is no clear evidence from the Rockall Trough to suggest that there have been changes in length composition but this is perhaps not surprising given the longevity of most of the species involved and the short history of the fishery. Even in longer established deep-water fisheries such as for *Hoplostethus atlanticus* in New Zealand (Clark, 2001) and *Squalus mitsukurii* in the Pacific (Wilson and Seki, 1994) size changes have not been observed. However, in an upper slope mixed trawl fishery off Australia it appears that there has been a reduction in total biomass and in the size of most fish stocks over a period of 20 years (Graham *et al.*, 1997). A marked decline in the abundance of older/larger fish was also reported. The short time scale of the Rockall Trough fishery and the longevity of the fish also means that it is too early for any changes in reproductive strategies to be detectable.

Changes at the total fish assemblage level are more difficult to detect. Although there are numerous surveys in the Rockall Trough that pre-date and span the period of the fishery (see Section 3) the use of different fishing gears in different areas and at different depths and also doubts about the completeness and accuracy of the total catch data for some of the earlier surveys makes it difficult to draw any firm conclusions on long term change. In 1985 SAMS carried out a series of trawl hauls using a semi-balloon otter trawl fished on a single warp at 1000 m in the Rockall Trough. The purpose of this series was to investigate the effect on catches of attaching artificial lights to the headline. The control hauls with no lights attached provide a replicate series at the same location and depth and pre-date the rapid increase in the present fishery that began in 1989. In 1999 SAMS returned to this area and using the same ship and trawl carried out a further five valid trawls (see below for gear damage). The data from these pre and post-fishery surveys are presently being analysed in detail for publication. These data, together with other survey data, were used in a report on the effects of fishing on deep-water fish species to the west of Britain (Basson *et al.*, in press). A preliminary multivariate analysis of the total catch data suggests that there have been changes between 1985 and 1999. The crustacean catch appears to show greater changes, possibly with a shift towards more scavenging species, but the analysis is more complex because of the added dimension of diurnal vertical migration (Gordon, unpublished data). There are indications that there has been a decline in fish diversity but not in taxonomic distinctness. Although there were some indications of changes in size spectra they were not conclusive.

The ecosystem effects of fishing activity can be defined as follows (Pope and Symes, 2000):-

- a) causes mortality on target fish species and incidentally on other biota
- b) makes food available to other species in the ecosystem by: discarding unwanted catch of fish and benthos, discarding wastes and killing and damaging animals in the path of the gear during its deployment
- c) disturbs the seabed through the action of some fishing gears
- d) generates litter composed of lost or discarded gear as well as other non-specific debris.
- e) modifies predator-prey relationships, thereby changing the flow of energy through parts of the system and the modification of habitats

The mortality of target species and other biota by bottom trawls has been described above. It is estimated that there will be a high mortality of all fish species entering a trawl irrespective of whether they are retained or escape. Discards are generally returned as dead whole organisms to the area where they were caught and although some will

be removed by birds and the pelagic fauna it is likely that a considerable proportion arrives back on the seabed. Since discards make up a considerable part of the total catch this is a significant input of organic material to the seabed. The extent to which benthic epifauna and infauna is destroyed or damaged by the physical impact of the trawls is unknown but it is likely that this will also provide a further significant input of non-living organic matter. Such inputs might be expected to benefit scavengers and indeed a study on the Australian slope suggested that over a twenty year period discarding from a trawl fishery may have resulted in a proliferation of crabs (Graham *et al.*, 1997).

Disturbance of the seabed as a result of the action of fishing gear is of increasing concern and there were many papers published on the subject in a recent ICES Symposium on the *Ecosystem Effects of Fishing* (Hollingworth, 2000). Only one paper considered the ecosystem effects of fishing in deep-water (Koslow *et al.* 2000). The effects of deep-water fishing activities on seamounts and their hard-bottom faunas, including corals, has been investigated in the South Pacific (see Koslow *et al.*, 2001 and Clark, 1999 for recent accounts in Australian and New Zealand waters respectively). The damage to deep-water coral reefs off the coast of Norway and their subsequent protection is well documented (Fosså *et al.*, in press). There are many reports of the occurrence of patches of deep-water corals in the Rockall Trough (see Rogers (1999) for a review). However, a lack of knowledge on the true extent of their distribution, both past and present, and of their ability to recover from damage makes it difficult to assess the impact of the fisheries on corals and other hard bottom communities. In some instances modest fishing effort may even serve to distribute fragments of living coral and result in the formation of new colonies (Rogers, 1999). However, in most cases the physical damage and the smothering by sediment is likely to cause the destruction of the colony. The AFEN surveys (see Section 4) discovered the Darwin Mounds in the northern Rockall Trough in 1998 (Bett 1999, 2001). These mounds, which are about 100 m across and up to 6 m high, are widely distributed over an area of about 60 square kilometers and support colonies of deep-water corals. More recent visual observations have revealed damage by trawling (Edwards, 2000).

While damage to hard bottom substrates may be the most obvious and readily explainable impact of fishing, it has to be recognised that most deep-water trawling takes place in areas of soft-bottomed sediments. Few fishermen, unless by accident or while searching for new grounds, will risk damaging their trawls by fishing on hard ground unless the rewards are high. In the Rockall Trough this usually means fishing at greater depths (>1200 m) for *Hoplostethus atlanticus*. The impact of trawling on deep-sea soft bottom sediments and their biota is virtually unknown. However, photographic surveys frequently reveal the presence of trawl marks on the seabed. In one such survey such marks were visible in 2 to 12% of all photographs at depths between 700 and 1300 m (Roberts *et al.* 2000). Evidence of trawl marks were also found during the AFEN surveys (Bett, 2000). Bett (2000) also reports on surface on a box core sample from west of the Hebrides that was considered disturbed by the passage of a bottom trawl.

At the start of any fishery on a virgin stock the initial catch rates will be high but will soon decrease as the accumulated biomass of older fish is removed. To maintain catch levels the fishing effort will increase and as a consequence the seabed will be subjected to even greater disturbance. Between 1975 and 1992 SAMS carried out many bottom trawl surveys on the Hebridean Terrace using several types of otter trawl and a beam (Agassiz) trawl. At depths greater than about 600 m there was never any damage to the trawl and only occasionally were small stones caught by the net. The most sampled area was the 1000 m contour and in 1999 an attempt to repeat a series of bottom trawls this depth using the same net that was used very successfully between 1983 and 1987 resulted in the loss of two trawls and only 5 valid tows. The trawls were severely damaged as a result of large stones entering the net. These stones, measuring up to 1.5 m in diameter, were relatively free of encrusting organisms and are almost certainly glacial erratics that had been lying buried in the sediment. Intense commercial trawling activity, using heavy rockhopper bottom gear, has probably dislodged them and deposited them on the surface. Another anthropogenic impact that manifests itself especially in the deeper water at the entrance to the Rockall Trough is the presence of clinker.

The loss of fishing gear, especially traps or gill nets, in deep water and the resulting ghost fishing has been recognised as a problem (Hopper, 1995a). In shallow water these gears will relatively quickly become fouled or otherwise inactivated but in deep water they may continue to ghost fish for many years.

How deep-water fishing might modify predator-prey relationships, thereby changing the flow of energy through parts of the system and alter the habitats is an interesting question. If there is an almost total mortality of all fish entering the trawl whether or not they are retained or escape through the meshes, then it is likely that the biomass of

all species will be declining. Other fishing gears, such as longlines, are much more selective for the larger species that are usually also the top predators. Life history characteristics will also mediate how the system will respond to large scale removals. For example the low fecundity, live-bearing sharks will be more vulnerable than a species with a high fecundity that produces large numbers of eggs. On the other hand a wide spatial distribution into areas that are not fished may help to protect some species.

Perhaps the most immediate change in predator prey relationships might be in response to the input of discards and other dead organisms. The SAMS time series of sampling suggests that there may have been an increase in the relative abundance of *Synaphobranchus kaupi*. *S. kaupi* is considered to be a scavenging species (Gordon and Mauchline, 1996). It is perhaps too early, in view of the longevity of most of the fish species, to detect any significant changes as a result of fishing activities. However, the long time-series of sampling in the Rockall Trough, albeit using different gears, is a unique archive of data that pre-dates the fishery and will be increasingly important as the effects of fishing manifest themselves either on the fish stocks or on the whole ecosystem.

The deep-water fishery exploits benthopelagic species whose diet is very largely composed of benthopelagic and pelagic species. The vertical and horizontal impingement of the mesopelagic fauna onto the slope is considered to be an important food source (Section 5). A decrease in the benthopelagic consumers may manifest itself in changes in the pelagic ecosystem. While the emphasis on investigations of the demersal fish stocks and benthic baseline studies for the oil industry is understandable, it is unfortunate that there has been a decline in pelagic research.

Clearly there are many concerns about the ecosystem effects of deep-water fisheries and these are succinctly summarised by the ICES Working Group on Ecosystem Effects of Fishing Activities (Anon. 2000b). The Working Group notes that the effects of fishing gears on habitats are generally the most long-lasting and irreversible of all effects of fishing on ecosystems. The Group considers that deep water habitats are likely to be highly vulnerable and urges ICES to “attach priority in its advice, and management agencies in their regulations, to ensuring that these new and expanding fisheries are kept sustainable both with regard to mortalities inflicted on all species (target and non-target) and effects on habitats”.

9. Management

The only management tool currently in force for the ‘new’ deep-water species is a restriction of effort regulation that is applicable within Community waters. It came into force in January 1996 and limits and apportions the effort by gear type to certain member states. There is no evidence that it has ever been enforced.

The present assessments of deep-water species in the ICES area are based on stocks that are defined by an area and a species. These stocks may have little relevance to the biological stocks and there have been no attempts at multi-species assessments. In general ICES Sub-areas are often inappropriate for deep-water stock delimitation (see above) but in the case of the Rockall Trough, with the exception of the most westerly parts of ICES Division VIb, the management unit of Sub-areas VI and VII and Division Vb probably has some biological validity for many species. Virtually nothing is known of the biological stock structure of deep-water species in the ICES area and it has been recognised as an important area for future research (Anon., 2000c).

In 1992 the European Commission recognised the potential vulnerability of deep-water resources and following a meeting in 1993, which considered possible management options, noted that “a precautionary approach should be taken in the development of new fisheries or the enhancement of many of the existing fisheries” (Anon, 1993). An international workshop on deep-water fisheries, supported by NATO and the EC, drew on experience from other regions and advised extreme caution in the exploitation of these resources (Hopper, 1995a,b). The advice from ICES ACFM based on the SGDEEP reports (section 7) has consistently been that “a cautious approach should be adopted” and that “fishing effort should be kept at a low level until sufficient information is gathered from existing fisheries to enable scientifically-based management decisions” (Anon., 1995b).

Following the first assessments by the Study Group in 1998 (Anon., 1998) ACFM began to give advice for the main species and continued to advise caution for the other species (Anon., 1999). As a result of the Study Group’s assessments in 2000 (Anon., 2000a), ACFM gave even more specific advice for the management of the main species (Anon., 2001a). The status of the key species of the Rockall Trough and the ICES management advice is

summarised below. The proposed reference points were U_{pa} (50% of virgin biomass) and U_{lim} (20% of virgin biomass)

Molva dypterygia

The SGDEEP assessment of *M. dypterygia* for the Rockall Trough in 1998 was based on the data from French trawlers that accounted for >90% of the landings of this species from Sub-area VI. The landings from Sub-area VII are a small by-catch and are either a separate species or sub-species. In the absence of any definitive data on stock discrimination and despite many uncertainties, the fish in Sub-area VI were considered to be a separate stock. The trend in commercial CPUE and abundance indices for the selected French trawler fleet (see Section 7) indicated a marked decline or both parameters. The results from the assessment models were unreliable but nevertheless SGDEEP was able to conclude that the current exploitable biomass (U) was considered to be below U_{lim} . The advice from ACFM was that fishing mortality (F) be reduced and that the possibility of reducing effort on the spawning grounds be considered (Anon., 1999). The assessment by SGDEEP in 2000 combined data from Sub-areas V, VI and VII and came to the same conclusions (Anon., 2000a). The group noted an increase in Scottish fishing effort and that there was a trend for a decrease in the abundance of larger fish in the landings. The advice from ACFM was that there should be no directed fisheries on this stock and that measures be implemented to reduce/minimise catches in the mixed fisheries (Anon., 2001a).

Coryphaenoides rupestris

The SGDEEP 1998 assessment was based on the French standardised CPUE data for ICES Sub-areas VI and VII, a swept area method using historical survey data, a pseudo-cohort analysis based on catch at age data for 1996 and 1997 (Lorance *et al.*, 2001) and an Irish estimate based on adjusting population indices to absolute values using survey data. The conclusion, which recognises the limitations of the data, was that the current biomass was above that of the proposed precautionary reference point (U_{pa}) (Anon., 1998). In its advice on management ICES ACFM gave no specific comment but simply reiterated its standard precautionary comment of that year. “ICES recommends immediate reduction in fisheries that cannot be shown to be sustainable. All remaining fishing activity should be conducted in the context of effective management which emphasises documentation of fishing activity, and which can react appropriately to biological characteristics of the populations” (Anon, 1999). SGDEEP included Division Vb in the 2000 assessment and concluded, again emphasising the limitations of the data that the stocks were now below U_{pa} and close to U_{lim} . On the basis of this assessment ICES ACFM recommended an immediate reduction in fishing effort by 50% for Sub-areas VI and VII and Division Vb combined (Anon., 2001a).

Aphanopus carbo

In 1998 SGDEEP considered that the time-series of data for ICES Sub-area VI was too short to carry out a reliable assessment and ACFM issued its standard precautionary advice. In 2000 SGDEEP, whilst recognising the short time-series and a lack of knowledge of the stock structure and migration, considered the “northern component” as being below U_{pa} and possibly below U_{lim} (Anon, 2000a). In 2000 ACFM recommended a reduction in fishing effort by 50% to bring catch down to around MSY (Anon., 2001a)

Hoplostethus atlanticus

SGDEEP 1998 recognised the problems associated with the CPUE data for an aggregating species targeted by only a small part of the fleet but nevertheless concluded that the stocks in Sub-area VI were below U_{lim} and in Sub-area VII below U_{pa} . In 1998 ACFM issued its standard precautionary advice. SGDEEP concluded in 2000 that the stock in Sub-area VI was close to U_{lim} but considered that the results from Sub-area VII were too unreliable to be used to give advice. It was considered that current level of landings were the result of the sequential discovery and depletion of aggregations. The ICES ACFM 2000 advice was that “orange roughy stocks can only sustain very low rates of exploitation. ICES repeats its general recommendation --- that fisheries on such species be permitted to expand very slowly, and are accompanied by programs to collect data which allow evaluation of stock status” (Anon. 2001a).

General advice

In addition to providing the above advice on these and other deep-water species ACFM was requested to give answers to specific requests from the North East Atlantic Fisheries Commission (NEAFC) and the EC. NEAFC asked what further information was needed to provide a basis for comprehensive management measures to conserve deep-water species and what interim management measures could be introduced based on existing biological information. In reply ACFM expressed its concern about the accuracy of the reporting of landings, the short time-series of CPUE that in some cases were not being updated, the mortality of discards and escapees, and the need for research on stock discrimination. As an interim management measure ACFM considered that a “stringent reduction of fishing effort” might be effective. Since many of the fisheries are mixed fisheries, they considered that a TAC regulation was “not very likely to be effective”. Whilst longlining is effective in some specialised areas it was not considered to be a viable alternative to trawling. ACFM was doubtful of the efficacy of closed areas both for biological and enforcement reasons (Anon. 2001a). In 1993 the EC had considered licensing as a possible conservation measure (Anon., 1993) and this was again considered by ACFM who phrased it as follows. “An immediate step towards effectively controlling the fishery could be the strict regulation of the numbers of boats, trawl-hours or numbers of hooks per day etc. Because, there is virtually no overlap with conventional shelf species there would be no conflict with any existing management measures. However, this can hardly be seen as an interim measure but rather as a medium term-measure.” As an interim measure ACFM suggested working towards effort reduction and at the same time supporting the continuation of the CPUE series.

The EC requested ICES to provide advice on possible management measures to be applied to deep-water species. In particular, ICES was requested to indicate the probable utility of application of (1) TACs, (2) geographical and/or temporal closures, (3) other technical measures including appropriate mesh size, hook size and gear structure and (4) effort limitation. In addition, ICES was requested to comment on environmental impacts created as a result of fishing for deep-water species and to advise on possibilities for reducing or eliminating such effects. ACFM structured its reply into a series of 13 points some of which were dealt with in more detail in an annex. As a prelude to the reply they highlight the fact that there had been numerous warnings and recommendations to adopt the precautionary approach and that these had gone unheeded. As a result most of the stocks were already over-exploited and it was too late to adopt the precautionary approach. ACFM concludes that “the immediate threat is that stocks may be fished down before the status of the stocks can be assessed. Compared to the economic damage of fishing down resources, a zero TAC for a few years might be a tolerable measure to prevent damage to the most sensitive habitats.” ACFM recognised that it was the deep-sea ecosystem including the fish stocks that was sensitive and required protection. They considered that no single management measure was likely to be effective. Closed areas were only likely to be of value as a long-term measure and much more research was necessary to assess how they might function in the deep-sea. (In this context a report of a recent expert workshop on “Managing risks to biodiversity and the environment on the high sea, including tools such as marine protected areas – scientific requirements and legal aspects” highlights some of the difficulties of closed areas (Thiel and Koslow, 2001)). Gear limitation and especially a trawl ban for selected species/areas was considered to be a useful measure. It could also be used as a measure to prevent the fishery moving into new areas. ACFM recognised that drastic reductions in catches were unavoidable and suggested setting TACs on the basis of 1-2 % of virgin biomass per year. However, they recognise that some species may be less vulnerable and could withstand a higher rate of exploitation. Many of Europe’s deep-water fisheries are mixed fisheries and it was recognised that using TACs as the primary management tool would be difficult. The low levels of TAC required could render the fishery unviable for fleets solely dependent on the deep-water resource and varying quotas for different species could lead to more incentive to discard, high-grade or misreport. They conclude that “implementation of TACs for deep-water stocks, *not accompanied by other measures*, probably would not prevent deep-sea ecosystems suffering adverse impacts.” ACFM states that a general licensing system should be implemented by the EC. This should be combined with TACs, seasonal and area closures and possibly with gear limitation. The remaining points are all concerned with the need for strict and effective enforcement, comprehensive data collection, surveys and research, support for studies on ecosystem effects and maintaining a dialogue between managers, the industry and scientists.

In the July 2000 the EC issued a press statement stating that it was concerned about the state of the deep-water fish stocks and that there was a need for quick action to prevent irreversible damage caused by unregulated fisheries. It further stated that it was proposing to recommend to European Council of Fisheries Ministers in December 2000 that TACs be introduced from January 2001. Several NGOs drew the Commission’s attention to the advice from ACFM that questioned the value of TACs. In reply the EC pointed out that TACs were a step in the right direction and that

to implement other measures would be unrealistic within the available time scale because of the “institutional requirements to be observed”. The proposals were announced on 1 December 2000 and included suggested TACs for all the main species of the Rockall Trough and an allocation to the member states on the basis of previous track record. These allocations were made for the whole northeast Atlantic area and not for specific ICES Sub-areas such as VI and VII (Rockall Trough). The net result of this was that the TACs were proposed for community waters and waters not under the sovereignty or jurisdiction of third countries in ICES Sub-areas I through XIV. The proposed quotas were based on a 20% reduction of the catches for the 1989-1998 period. For example the TAC for *Coryphaenoides rupestris* was allocated between seven European countries. France by virtue of her fishery in the Rockall Trough was allocated 72% of the catch, Denmark was allocated 18% for her Skagerrak fishery and Spain 7 % for her fishery in international waters. The UK and Ireland were allocated 0.6 and 0.2 % of the catch respectively. By setting the quota for the whole ICES area it would have precluded unregulated fishing by EU vessels in international waters. Prior to the meeting of the Council of Fisheries Ministers it became obvious from press reports that there was going to be opposition to the proposed TACs for deep-water species from the UK and Ireland. In the event the Council decided to postpone the setting of TACs for a year to allow more time to collect information and scientific advice. They also decided that to prevent a rush to build up historical track records the 2000 and 2001 catches would not be taken into account when setting such TACs.

Although almost all of the Rockall Trough lies within European Community waters it is very probable that there is continuity with the stocks on the slopes to the west of the Rockall Plateau and the Hatton Bank. Before the UK renounced its claim to a 200 mile exclusive fishery zone around Rockall the fisheries on most of these slopes, although not regulated, were controlled in the sense that access was restricted to certain EU countries or by third party agreements. Now that these areas, which include parts of the northern Rockall Trough, are in international waters they have been subjected to unregulated fishing. Much of the attention has focused on the exploitation of haddock on the Rockall Bank by, amongst others, Russia (Anon. 2001b). However, Russia also has a long history of deep-water exploratory fishing in the areas outside the 200 mile zone dating back to 1965 (Vinnichenko, 2000) and is now moving into the areas that have become international waters (Vinnichenko and Khlivnoy, 2001). Vinnichenko and Khlivnoy (2001) provide some information on the deep-water fisheries in ICES Divisions VIb and Vb. Spain (Durán Muñoz *et al.*, 2000) and the Faroe islands (Thomsen, 1998, 1999) have both developed deep-water fisheries in international waters, including the Hatton Bank.

The North-East Atlantic Fisheries Commission (NEAFC) recognised the seriousness of the 1998 ICES management advice on deep-water species and held an open hearing hosted by the European Commission in 1999. Since then NEAFC has made little progress to effect any management in international waters. At the Annual Meeting of NEAFC in November 2000 the EU stressed the vulnerability of the stocks and “the importance for NEAFC to take responsibility”. The EU also suggested that NEAFC “should open up a discussion of different regulatory measures, such as effort limitations, closed areas, gear limitations or any combination of these. According to the EU scientific advice on some of these species is somewhat inconsistent and contradictory. To make progress, more information is required for managers to be able to fully comprehend the advice needed and transparency must be increased” (Anon., 2001b). It is these remarks by the EU that probably prompted NEAFC to request further advice from ICES.

The request by NEAFC to ICES was as follows:

- a) Characterise and classify the most important deep-sea species according to their life-history strategies and rank them by vulnerability to exploitation together with more well known deep-sea species e.g. redfish and Greenland halibut.
- b) Clarify advice statements for stocks where little biological information is available in order to generate consistency of advice,
- c) Give established reference points for statements on stock status,
- d) Provide advice on how to improve data-collecting systems and advise on appropriate improvements for monitoring deep-sea resources.

The ranking of the species according to several life history parameters was carried out by WGDEEP (Anon., 2001c) and the results were compiled into a simple table by ACFM (Anon., 2001d). Of the species relevant to the Rockall Trough the most vulnerable were the deep-water sharks and *Hoplostethus atlanticus*. *Coryphaenoides rupestris* was at an intermediate level and the least vulnerable were *Aphanopus carbo*, *Molva molva*, *M.dipterygia* and *Brosme*

brosme. ICES advises that this information on life history parameters is useful but not a perfect guide to sustainable management.

NEAFC in the Annex to their request for advice give details of the specific areas that they considered to be lacking in clarity. One area of concern was the apparently two contradictory statements of advice for species where there was little biological information. These were “ICES recommends immediate reduction in these fisheries unless they can be shown to be sustainable” and “consistent with a precautionary approach fishing should not be allowed to expand faster than the acquisition of information necessary to provide a basis for sustainable exploitation”. In reply ICES ACFM (Anon.,2001d) explained that the first statement applied to those fisheries that are already considered to be harvested outside safe biological limits (Category 2). The second statement referred to new fishery that may develop on virgin stocks or where only a limited part of the stock has been exploited (Category 1). Where the state of a stock is unknown, such as the deep-water sharks, then Category 1 advice applied. It is possible for some species for the advice to fall into both categories. For example, the ‘stock’ of *Hoplostethus atlanticus* in Sub-area VI is category 2 while the ‘stocks’ of this species in all other areas are category 1. ICES also gave its justification for continuing to use the reference points first proposed by SGDEEP in 1998 but state that it would keep these under review as scientific knowledge accumulates. ICES, together with NEAFC and national governments, are currently reviewing reporting procedures.

Conclusions

The Rockall Trough and the adjacent Faroe-Shetland Channel has aptly been described as the cradle of deep-sea biology by Gage (2001). The deep-water fish fauna was fairly accurately described before the end of the first decade of the 20th Century. Occasional fishery related surveys were carried out in the intervening years but the significant period of scientific investigation began in the 1970s. The SAMS multi-disciplinary approach to the study of the Rockall Trough, programmes such as LOIS and BENBO, and the oil related impact assessments have provided a wealth of knowledge on the physical and biological oceanography of the area. The wide ranging fisheries surveys carried out by the UK and Germany in the 1970s and 1980s provide a unique insight into the pre-fishery state of the stocks. Subsequent and ongoing surveys from the early 1990s by Ireland and the UK are and will be of great value in helping to evaluate the impact of the current fishery. The detailed site specific studies by SAMS in the Rockall Trough and SAMS/IOS at two transects in the Porcupine Seabight have not only defined the fish assemblages, but also provided material for studies of biological parameters with particular emphasis on growth and reproduction where seasonality of sampling is important. The recent French surveys at the same specific site in the Rockall Trough have added substantial new post-fishery data from this well sampled area. It is frequently stated that not enough is known about the biology of deep-water species but, as Section 5 indicates, the amount of published information on both target and non-target species is rapidly increasing. There are also considerable amounts of raw material awaiting analysis.

The development of the commercial deep-water fishery has been well documented since its inception. The evaluation of CPUE data, the market sampling of landings and the studies on discarding which were supported as part of the EC Deep-fisheries Project added greatly to our knowledge but it is a concern that such work has diminished following the completion of the project. The time-series of CPUE, although short, have enabled the stocks to be assessed and the advice from ICES is that all the deep-water fish in the Rockall Trough are being fished outside safe biological limits. Given the longevity of the fish, the high age at first maturity and the high mortality of immature fish, it is probable that the true effect the fishery throughout the 1990s has not yet become evident. Despite all this, and the repeated warnings about the need for caution from numerous sources no action has been taken to regulate the fishery or seriously address ecosystem effects of the fishery, which at present levels is unsustainable.

There is general agreement amongst scientists, the fishing industry and the politicians that the fragile, deep-water stocks are seriously overexploited but political imperatives dictate that uncertainties and inconsistencies in the scientific assessment and advice are used to postpone the urgent action that is required. It is perhaps not much of a consolation but, at least in the Rockall Trough, we know a lot about the ecosystem that is being destroyed while in other areas, such as the Hatton Bank, we will never know what is being destroyed.

Acknowledgements

The author is grateful to the Scottish Association for Marine Science (SAMS) for their support of his research on the deep-water fish of the Rockall Trough from 1975 to the present. However, the views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not represent the policy of SAMS or any other organisation that has helped to fund the research.

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Figure 1. The Rockall Trough, Northeast Atlantic.