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Invest in fish

Participants' Summary Report – Invest in Fish South West (liFSW) Community Forum

This document presents the findings of the Community Forum conducted as part of the Invest in Fish South West (liFSW) project. On 28 April 2004, Opinion Leader Research held a one-day Community Forum with 98 members of the public. The aim of the event was to explore perceptions of fishing in the South West among people who are not directly linked to the fishing industry. Catchers and processors were screened out as these groups are being consulted through other channels in the liFSW project.

The objectives of the Community Forum were to explore:

- Views of fishing, the fishing industry and other related activities in the South West region
- Hopes, concerns and expectations for the future of fishing, the fishing industry and the marine environment in the South West

Perceptions of the South West

- At the beginning of the Community Forum participants were asked to discuss what they believed made the South West special or important
- Overall, participants are very positive about the South West, with many expressing a strong sense of pride. Some say that they feel privileged to live in the South West
 - Participants think living in the South West is also perceived to be desirable by people from outside the region, with many people from across the UK buying or wanting second homes in the South West
- 'Diversity' is a word that many participants feel characterises the South West
 - They believe the South West is exemplified by its diversity in terms of its people, attractions, combination of rural and urban life and landscape among other things

Perceptions of fishing, fishing industry and marine environment in the South West

- Participants arrived at the event with varied levels of engagement and knowledge of fishing, the fishing industry and the marine environment
 - Some participants are passionate from the start, and are already engaged with the issues at the beginning of the day
 - The majority become engaged during the course of the event and begin to speak freely about the topics, recognising the history and tradition of fishing and related issues to the South West as a whole
 - Only a minority attach little value to the issue and find it hard to talk about
- Participants do hold positive views of fishing, the fishing industry and the marine environment, but they perceive these to be facing a number of serious problems. Many feel that fishing in the South West is characterised by decline (economic, social and biological), political contention, bureaucracy and ecological problems. They believe that:
 - Negative news dominates the media around these issues
 - The fishing industry is in decline, politicised and over regulated, mainly by the EU
 - That certain fish are facing extinction due to over fishing yet participants are unsure as to which ones precisely. Cod is frequently mentioned in this respect
 - The marine environment to have deteriorated in recent years. Participants talk about problems facing the sea bed and perceive local marine wildlife to be vulnerable as a direct result of the fishing industry. A number mention the impact this has on the dolphin population in the South West
- They consider that these changes have led to hardship for many local fishing communities, families and individual catchers
 - There is an expectation that the South West will continue to see demographic changes as the industry continues to change and other factors, such as a growth in second-home buyers, will also impact adversely on established local communities

- There are concerns that difficulties facing fisheries and related sectors are currently aggravated by what they believe to be political interference from the EU, especially over fish quotas:
 - The Common Fisheries Policy (CFP) is not perceived to work and some participants consider it gives an unfair advantage to Spanish and French catchers
 - They regard these policies as having been imposed without local consultation
 - There is concern that they are not regionally sensitive

Perceived importance of the fishing industry

- Overall, participants consider the fishing industry to be important, but further probing reveals that there are some variations in the extent to which people value the industry:
 - Some participants consider the fishing industry to be important for them personally and to be very much at “the heart of the South West”. A lot of the conversation focuses on the aesthetics of fishing villages, and how it is a unique and historically important aspect of the South West
 - A larger number consider fishing to be important but not to have a direct impact on their lives
 - Some want to know more about the fishing industry and its contribution to the South West economy having given the issues little consideration prior to coming to the event
 - A few, however, consider the industry to have declined beyond hope and regard it as belonging to the past. As such they feel that it is now of little importance

Perceived impact of the fishing industry

- When probed, participants perceive the fishing industry to affect them personally in a number of ways
 - As residents of the South West
 - As consumers of fish (see themselves as being affected by the choice and price of fish)
- A small number of participants argue that changes to the fishing industry have already happened, and the majority of people in the South West have not been affected. Some accuse others of ‘harking back’ to a nostalgic past in this respect

Sources of information on fishing, the fishing industry and marine environment

- Some participants have deliberately accessed information on issues around fishing prior to the Forum. It appears, however, that the majority have not actively sought out information on fishing, the fishing industry and marine environment
 - Consistent with other findings, fishing is not a top of mind issue for many and as such is not necessarily something that participants would go out of their way to find out about. However, it is clear that some do read/watch/listen to news items on these issues when they encounter them

- Also many do emphasise that these issues are important and say that they would be interested in receiving more balanced information on it
- Participants' main source of information on fishing, the fishing industry and marine environment comes from local media sources, especially local TV news reports
 - Some believe the information they come across in the local media to be predominantly negative. People cite stories about fish becoming extinct, the fishing industry facing insurmountable problems and marine life being threatened
 - During the event, some participants comment on how much of what they know relies on these negative local media sources, and become increasingly critical of these. They believe the local media should provide the public with a more balanced perspective
- Aside from local media, other sources of information include: personal or family experience, word of mouth, interest groups, national TV shows, school and other fish related attractions e.g. Plymouth Aquarium and Barbican
- Importantly, all participants desire more information on these issues
 - Having engaged with the subject in the Community Forum they consider it important to be educated on the state of fishing
 - They call on the Government, the fishing industry and catchers themselves to provide this information and make suggestions for how this could be achieved which include:
 - Teaching children at schools what fish species there are and which are nice to eat
 - Educating young people from an early age about the diverse range of marine life in the South West
 - Collaborating with local merchants to enable the public to try new kinds of fish and received guidance and recipe ideas for how fish can be prepared

Priorities and options for the future

- In response to these problems, participants call for options to be developed which:
 - Involve all relevant stakeholders in developing options to ensure ownership of the proposed solutions
 - Have a regional focus and are able to respond to regional issues, although many participants stress that any regional initiatives will need national and international back-up to be effective
 - Consider the fishing industry in the broader context of both the marine environment which it has a direct impact on and the wider economic situation of the South West
 - Address the problems inherent in operating under the current quota system and deal with the issue of discard
 - Place a strong emphasis on education and communication across the public and all sectors affected by fishing
- At the end of the Community Forum, participants were given a series of broad options for the future of fishing and the marine environment in the South West and were asked to discuss those that they do and do not like. It should be noted that while participants are unanimous in

saying that 'doing nothing' is not an option, the other ideas presented provoke more mixed reactions:

Option least liked:

Do nothing

Options liked by only a minority:

Restricting time catchers can spend at sea

Decommissioning of boats

Options liked but not perceived as vital:

Not fishing for certain types of fish at all

Diversifying employment (e.g. for those involved in fishing industry, or increasing emphasis on angling for example)

Short term financial support for those affected by measures

Options most liked:

Permanent closed areas

Temporary closed seasons (spawning grounds)

Local management

Reactions to the Event

- There was an overwhelmingly positive response to the Community Forum:
 - Participants felt it was an important step in bringing residents of the South West together
 - Many appeared to gain or develop their awareness of fishing, the fishing industry and marine environment and a number said they valued the opportunity to do this
 - Participants welcomed having an opportunity to learn about and have their say on issues which so many of them perceive to be of great importance
 - Groups from a range of backgrounds appeared to enjoy working together to explore options for the future of fishing in the South West

Conclusions

- The Community Forum has explored a broad range of public views on issues around fishing and the marine environment in the South West. It has clearly demonstrated that these are issues that the public engage with and feel passionate about although the extent of engagement, and degree to which people prioritise these issues does vary
- The research has unearthed significant levels of consensus, perhaps more than initially anticipated, across participants from different backgrounds about priorities for the future of fishing and the marine environment
- There is universal agreement that 'something must be done' about the future of fishing in the South West which is currently perceived to face major problems in terms of:
 - Operating under the current quota system
 - Dealing with discard
 - Stock issues/population changes
 - The impact that further changes to the industry will have on communities in the South West and on related industries
- It appears, from this first stage of consultation, that in the future public attitudes and behaviour are likely to drive the agenda of interest groups who are dealing with these issues
 - As such, the public represent a potentially powerful force and one which will ultimately demand broader engagement of industry representatives with these issues if they wish to retain public favour and support
- This highlights the extent to which the effectiveness of liFSW will be dependent on effective communications, particularly with the public
 - Those who attended the Community Forum express a strong interest in receiving more information on the issues discussed at the event including:
 - The impact of fishing and state of industry
 - Clarifying the importance of fishing to the South West
 - Participants stress that when communicating with the public information must be clear and accessible

Next steps

- A significant number of participants expressed interest in staying involved with the liFSW project
 - The vast majority of participants were willing to have their names added to a database to receive more information and to be part of a Community Panel which will be established to ensure ongoing public involvement with liFSW project
- Later this year Opinion Leader Research will be facilitating the first Community Panel session with representatives from the general public to ensure on-going public input to the process. Plans for this are currently being prepared.