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Commercial Fisherman from Sarn Mellteyrn

A talk given during the Pen Llŷn Community Assembly on the Climate

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Seasons have disappeared to some extent. We're having more periods of weather now, we're having long calm and then long periods of wind and rain.

What we're also seeing is that it's much warmer in the winter. Years ago it would freeze in the winters, and it would be very cold, and during that time would stop catching lobsters around thanksgiving until around April because the sea temperature was cold. But in the last ten to fifteen years now we've been catching them more or less all year round.

According to scientific data the temperature of the sea has risen by 0.8 degrees Celsius since records began in 1870. It doesn't sound like much but it is a significant increase to the temperature of the sea.

Also, according to the statistics, the sea level has risen by 16.5cm since the turn of the century in 1901, which again may not sound like much but it is a lot over time.

Another thing we find with the sea warming up is that we get more alien species in our waters. There is a change in the pattern - we get a lot of spider crabs here now - twenty years ago we hardly saw them, but this year they are a pest along this shore. They pile up in the cages and eat the bait. Twenty years ago they weren't here but now they are here in large numbers because the sea temperature is just about warm enough to support them.

Also in terms of fish we see species such as the red mullet and the bream and the gilthead bream and the black bream. These are warm water species from the mediterranean and Biscay Bay that way. We never used to see them but their numbers are increasing and they are staying for longer spells too.

Another thing we see is that the patterns of fish such as mackerel - a traditional fish in our seas here - has changed completely. Long ago we would catch mackerel from May to September. But now, in recent years, we don't see mackerel until around August/ September, and they stay on until around Christmas. And then species like the cod, those have more or less disappeared from the seas. We are seeing a change in the marine environment.

One part of the work I'm doing now is looking at the spider crab, and what effect it has on the lobsters and the brown crabs. Because we've seen a significant reduction in brown crabs over the last ten years in our waters throughout Wales. What they think is happening is that the brown crabs come ashore in May to get rid of their old shell and to grow more, and at the same time that the brown crabs come in we think the spider crabs come in and prey on the brown crabs and this is why they're in decline. So part of the work I'm doing this year with Bangor University is to catch samples of spider crabs and see what the content of their stomach is, to try and get information and data on this as evidence.

We are also doing a study on lobsters. I have one area this year where everything I catch there, big or small, is 'notched' and put back and then we can assess the strength of the stock. This is all going to be important so that we can adapt and survive if these changes are going to continue.

Dafydd: Are you collaborating with Bangor University to record these things?

Yes. Bangor University was asking for volunteers to take part in this scientific work. I've been doing it for about fifteen years now. We have been doing a study on crabs and sea urchins. I'm also currently doing research with Seafast into the number of sea bass.

It is important that we as fishermen work with scientists and science to get the right data and information so that we can adapt and keep our businesses thriving in order and continue to be able to supply food to the population.

Another thing that's important and we have raised it with the Welsh assembly and DEFRA is the need to invest in our fishing industry so that we get other technologies to power our fishing boats - electrification or hydrogen.

Most fishermen use either diesel engines or petrol engines like I do, so we are dependent on oil. We're a small fleet in Wales, around 450 boats, and since they have announced a climate crisis we would like it if they could invest instead of just making declarations, investments that would support businesses in Wales so we can work in a better way. Decarbonizing Wales' fishing fleets would be of interest and of use to the industry.

Dafydd: Are there a number of things like this that you would like to see happen to deal with the climate crisis?

Sion: Yes, yes it is important that we are taking action. We are in a period of time now where we see a transformation in terms of transport and vehicles and so on, and yes it will take time, but I would like to have the same investment in the fishing industry, because we supply food and it is a golden opportunity to invest. There's a company in the Isle of Wight called Cheetah Marine, and they've started to put electric engines on fishing boats. The biggest problems are the weight of the batteries at the moment. There are other companies making hybrid machines too, but as technology advances it is important that we in the fishing industry also move with the times.

Dafydd - thank you very much Sion. What you have said is extremely interesting and also extremely relevant. I'm sure it will spark a lot of discussion here today and over the coming months. We'll keep in touch with you.

Sion - Yes, keep in touch and if possible I would like to have the minutes of today's meeting as I was unable to attend today.

Dafydd - Sion is one of the members of the assembly who couldn't come today for obvious reasons but it's great that we got in touch with him thanks to technology.

Sion - You're welcome. I hope your day goes well.