

190917 Swedish radio Kaliber report on fake fishing figures

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Fake fishing figures

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One winter evening this year, one of the largest Swedish trawlers entered the harbour in Skagen, Denmark. In the haul was 1,400 tonnes of herring and sprat from the Baltic Sea. Fish that will be turned into fishmeal in the factory at the harbour.

The captain has reported that there is about one third herring and two thirds sprat in the catch. However, when the inspectors conduct their first test it seems that something doesn't add up. Today's episode of Kaliber investigates the false reports made by professional fishermen – which can have consequences for life in the sensitive Baltic Sea.

In the middle of October this year, important decisions will be taken regarding the future of fishing in the Baltic Sea. Then, EU Member States will decide how much fish can be caught. They decide the quotas for next year for different species. But how does one really know how much fish is in the sea and how many fish can be caught before the balance of the ecosystem is disrupted and fish stocks are affected?

Well, a very important source for our knowledge comes from the fishermen themselves and their information on how much they catch and of which species. But – what happens if the fishermen provide false information?

In Skagen

We travel to Skagen and meet Kasper Schou, head of the Danish Fisheries Agency.

- Now we are standing in Skagen at the harbour looking at FF Skagen's fishmeal factory. This is not where the tourists come to visit. They are in another part of the harbour. But here is where the money is made. My name is Kasper Schou. I am the vice fishery inspector at the department in Fredrikshamn.

Here in Skagen, in northern Jutland in Denmark, at the point between the Skagerrak and Kattegatt this fishing harbour has long been home to small fishing boats. Large, state-of-the-art trawlers are located by the quays beyond the tourist strip.

- Yes, they are very large boats, this is about big money. These are the largest Danish boats.

That is a Danish boat?

- Yes, this is a Danish boat. It is the biggest Danish boat, so far.

The biggest that day is as long as a football pitch; a 90 metre Danish trawler. Boats that can carry up to 2,000 tonnes of fish – the equivalent in weight of about 1,500 small cars. In a single load.

It is here that a large portion of the herring and sprat caught in the Baltic Sea during the autumn and winter months is transported. It is here we find the Swedish boats that awake our interest.

The boat we see before us now, the Swedish boat, is that one of the boats you have inspected?

- Yes, it's one of those we inspected during winter and spring.

The Swedish and Danish fisheries are closely intertwined. Swedes are part owners in the fishing industry in Jutland and it is here that the largest trawlers are built, which are then sold to Swedish fishing companies, amongst others. Some of the boats are so big that they are unable to enter harbours. However, here in Skagen the boats have enough space to load and unload their cargo. Fish which will be sold to customers for food or be ground down into fishmeal.

Skagen is home to one of the world's largest manufacturers of fishmeal and fish oil. Fishmeal that in turn becomes fodder for fur animals and farmed salmon.

Oily fish from the Baltic Sea, such as herring, can contain environmental toxins which as dioxins and PCBs. Therefore a large portion of herring and sprat is ground down. In this process it is possible to remove the poisonous dioxins.

This is where it is possible for the fishing vessels to provide false information regarding what is in their haul, since the fish are being ground down into powder.

This is why inspections of boats from Sweden, Denmark and other countries are made.

Inspections

For almost a week the large fishing boat has dragged its trawl in the Baltic and filled the boat with herring and sprat.

The inspectors from the Danish Fisheries Agency decide to check if the cargo is in accordance with what the boat's skipper has reported in his logbook.

- if it doesn't look right, based on what is described in the logbook, then we will take them in for an inspection.

The noise is loud when the fish are pumped out from the boat through the thick pipe into the factory at the harbour.

This is when the inspectors take samples of fish. At regular intervals black buckets are filled with herring and sprat which flood into the factory. At least 100 kilos or 0.05% if the load exceeds 200 tonnes. The samples must correspond to the contents of the load, and the same method is used across the EU.

- They are obviously tired of being inspected. They generally know what they have in their load.

You say they know very well what they have in their load

- I think they know very well what they have onboard. Many of them have been fishing longer than I've been an inspector.

The doors open on the blue van belonging to the Danish Fisheries Agency and the buckets filled with fish are driven to another building in the harbour.

Here the fish is poured out, sorted and counted. Some fish have been destroyed while being transported from the Baltic Sea and it can be difficult to differentiate a herring from its relative the sprat. When the last bucket has been counted, the inspectors involved summarise their findings.

And soon the skipper will know if what he has reported is consistent with what the inspectors have found. If not, then there can be consequences for him, for example in the form of fines in Denmark. And by extension also for the Baltic Sea because the balance in the sea can be disturbed when a species' risks being fished out.

People catch sprat and report it as herring. Why do they do this?

- I have a good idea of why and that is because the vessels have similarly large herring quotas as they do for sprat, it can be more difficult to catch the herring they would rather report it as sprat. That is why they do it.

Kasper Schou from the Danish Fisheries Agency is responsible for inspections of vessels in northern Jutland and he says that boats often have similarly large quotas – they want to be able to fish as much herring as sprat. And when one quota is filled, they are no longer allowed to fish for that particular species. Because it is easier to catch sprat they will often report their sprat catches as herring, he says.

And fake reporting is not a new phenomenon, notes Kasper Schou:

- This is a problem that has been going on for many years.

Here is today's edition of eko at quarter to five. The EU Commission has today decided on an immediate fishing stop for cod in the sea around Skåne, Blekinge, Poland and Lithuania.

A species that feeds a lot on herring is the cod. At the end of July, the EU Commission implemented an emergency stop for all commercial cod fishing in the southern Baltic Sea in order to protect the stock. The cod has become increasingly small and skinny due to, parasite infestation, the anoxic sea floor, and a lack of food amongst other reasons. And for the adult cod herring and sprat are top of their menu.

Even herring and sprat have declined in the area where cod is present. And even those fish are skinny, likely an effect of the reduced access to the bottom-dwelling animals that the herring eat.

- In recent years they have been fished too hard.

Joakim Hjelm is Head of Department and a researcher at the Department of Aquatic Resources at the Marine Fish Laboratory in Lysekil, which is run by the Swedish University of Agriculture.

He is one of the Swedish researchers participating in the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea, ICES, which advises authorities and politicians on how much fishing they believe the seas can withstand. In order to provide robust advice, ICES collect information on, for example, how much fishing takes place. In the Baltic Sea, this is done by their own test fishing, by analysing the fishermen's data on their catches, and with other methods.

But what happens when professional fishermen give false data?

- We give advice based on their data and therefore if we are given false information then we will also give false recommendations. So it becomes a catch 22 situation.

What can this lead to?

- That we fish far too much, we give too large a recommendation for one stock and one that is too small for another, which means that we end up knocking one of them out.

And to find out how common it is to provide false reports, Kaliber requested documents from the most recent herring fishing season in the Baltic Sea. Inspection reports from the large scale, or pelagic, Swedish commercial fishery – which lands its catch in Denmark. The season extends from autumn until spring, a total of 29 inspections. And here are a few examples:

One winter evening, a Swedish trawler approaches Skagen with 1,000 tonnes of fish. The captain states that he has just under 60% herring and 40% sprat onboard. The inspection later reveals that the load only contains just over 10% of herring. The captain is informed of the risk of being fined.

One morning earlier this year, one of the bigger trawlers comes into Skagens' harbour with just over 1,400 tonnes of fish. The captain reports that there is 85% of herring onboard. However, the boat has just under half as much.

In more than half of the catches investigated on the boats – on 15 of 29 occasions – the inspectors find differences, sometimes large differences, between their findings and what the fishermen themselves report.

It is not a crime to report the wrong species in the catch when fishing in the Baltic Sea. However, there cannot be a difference of more than 10% between how much fish is reported in the catch compared to what the inspections show. If there is, then the skipper risks a sanction or fine. And in seven of the cases in our investigation the Danish Fisheries Agency believe that the Swedish vessels false reports violate the legislation and have reported the cases to the police.

The Danish fisheries authorities also submit reports to their Swedish colleagues at the Agency for Marine and Water Management – who can then deduct quota from the vessels based on what the port inspections have shown.

When we summarise the false reports during the time period we are investigating, it turns out that the fishermen take out almost 50% more sprat from the Baltic Sea than what they themselves report. And about 50% less herring than they claim. A huge difference, in other words.

If the researchers trust the figures provided by the fishermen then they will believe that there is far more herring in the sea than what there really is.

Kasper Schou, head of the Danish Fisheries Agency, has also compiled a recent inspection of all the Swedish boats in Skagen. And it shows the same thing. With his report in front of him, he shows one of the boats that stands out:

Here is one of the crooks...

It is one of the biggest Swedish trawlers, one of the bad ones as he puts it. Instead of the 1,000 tonnes of herring which the captain says is on the boat there was actually 129 tonnes of herring on-board.

What do you think about that?

- It is an incredible difference. If you convert it into money it is about 1.4 million kronor (€187,489).

1.4 million kronor difference?

- In Danish kronor. So it's huge sums we're talking about.

Because it is ultimately about big money, says Kasper Schou, because the fishermen can fill up their herring quota with sprat and therefore continue fishing because they still have sprat left in their quota.

Kasper Schou points to a figure at the bottom of his report.

- This is the amount of fish we have moved over when we have made our inspections. 4,358 tonnes....

The figure, just over 4,300 tonnes, shows how much the boats reported as herring but were in fact sprat that the inspectors found.

That fishermen provide false reports on their catches is not news to the researcher Joakim Hjelm in Lysekil. He says that researchers have known that it may have been going on for up to ten years.

However, since catch reports are an important part of estimating the size of fish stocks, there is a severe danger that submitting false data risks the collapse of fish species. Thereby, fishermen also cut off an important source of their own income.

- Yes, that is the case. And the fishermen have begun to understand that now. So they are more concerned about providing correct data than they were ten years ago. That's my understanding.

Is that what they say?

- That's what they say.

However, when we show him some of the control reports he responds:

This was one example...what do you think about it?

Quite surprised now I think...we have been talking about this for many years...I'm quite surprised.

But is it true that the false reporting has been going on for several years? Or were the results from the inspections in winter a coincidence? We decide to continue reviewing the inspections from recent years and request more information from the government agencies.

Welcome to the Fisheries Agency. You are now number two in the queue.

On-board

Today, in the harbour of Skagen there is a Swedish trawler from the west coast that is recognised from the inspection reports, Västfjord. On this day the boat is changing its trawl and the noise from the engines is loud.

Swedes? Do you mind if we interrupt?

- Is Swedish Radio here in Skagen?

Richard Jarander is one of the part owners of the boat.

I saw in reports that your boat was inspected.

- I can tell you that I'm very annoyed with the inspection, at least one of them. I just think it's strange that we come up with such different figures. If I come ashore and report about 50-50 herring and sprat, that is what we have come up with in our own checks on-board.

How do you do them?

So when you have taken your samples you then fill in the logbook with how much herring has been caught?

- Yes, of course.

(Shall we have a coffer or? – voice over the on-board radio).

So we're talking about having an independent reviewer who evaluates the inspections. Far too often and on too many occasions we don't come to the same result.

Nevertheless, this is the accepted system that the EU has.

- Yes, sure. But when I am certain that I have reported correctly according to the information that we have come to on-board and they then arrive at another figure, then something isn't right.

You don't cheat so that you can fill your quota?

No, I fish it up anyway only that it costs more money. We have much more sprat left than herring in our quota this year, it's nothing.

Assume that they are correct and that you are wrong about what is in your catch, then it would be an error in the reporting about how much fish is taken out of the sea?

- Yes, it could be, absolutely. It is easiest for us, more fuel efficient to catch sprat. Herring is more difficult to catch, it is found in more difficult fishing grounds and more fuel is needed.

To fill your herring quota you need to take slightly different routes, fish in other places and stay at sea for longer.

- Exactly.

And that it is also about saving on fuel is one of the causes of the false reporting written in the report that the Swedish Agency for Marine and Water Management recently published.

Richard Jarander from the Västfjord boat is critical of how the inspection samples are taken. However, Kasper Schou from the Danish Fisheries Agency says that they have clear guidelines from the EU on how inspections should be conducted:

- Yes, but we have perfectly clear guidelines for how samples shall be taken from industrial fishing vessels and that is what we stick to.

And you do the same as is done throughout the EU, as has been agreed?

- Yes, we do.

We also review the reports from the Danish Fisheries Agency for the first half of 2018 and all of 2017. And the pattern is recognisable again.

In one case there is only 1% of herring in the 1,000 tonnes of heavy cargo, although the captain states in his logbook that there should be almost 40% herring.

And when we count all the inspections of Swedish boats that were conducted in Jutland between 2017 and spring 2019 – almost 100 inspections – it is shown that fishermen have provided false data in more than half of the cases.

False reporting can affect quota decisions relating to how much fishing can take place in the Baltic Sea. Decisions that can affect life beneath the surface and the sensitive ecosystem.

In Fiskebäck, Gothenburg, lies Sweden's largest fishing harbour. This is the where the head office is located of the Swedish pelagic federation, a cooperative organisation for the large Swedish trawlers that fish in the North Sea and Baltic Sea. The pelagic fleet consists of 34 vessels that fish herring and sprat amongst other species. Here is Anton Paulrud CEO:

- Our belief is that the future looks very good. We are 34 large vessels. So there are about 350 to 400 full-time employees.

And almost 60% of all the fish they catches comes from the Baltic Sea. Herring and sprat which is almost exclusively ground down into fodder. And this is where the problems with false reporting are to be found. This becomes clear as we go through the recent inspections:

- It's a huge problem and we have to come up with a solution so that there is credibility from both sides. There are certainly some who play around with their numbers.

Why do they do that?

- Yes, it is to get the right quota composition, of course.

The Swedish Agency for Marine and Water Management believes that there are financial incentives to falsely report. How do you see it?

- Yes...there probably is an incentive for some of the fishermen who don't have the right quota compositions to do so. But at the same time even the agency understands that it is difficult to estimate herring and sprat. Therefore they have not...it is not criminal to estimate incorrectly.

So really it is risk-free to falsely report?

- Ehhh...risk-free and risk-free...yes risk-free would I not want to say...it is a difficult question to answer. Rather, it is difficult to correctly estimate. But it is not risk-free, nobody wants a bad reputation. People want to do the right thing and everyone wants to do what is right for themselves. I would not want to exaggerate the problem. Despite this it is something we are working on, it must be correct.

We look at some of the inspection reports from the Danish Fisheries Agency.

Here you have some numbers...(shows). What do you think when you see this?

-Yes...here he has either screwed up the numbers or it has gone completely crazy.

He is though a seasoned fishermen who has been around for many years.

- Yes...either the inspection is wrong or what he has written.

But that is a huge discrepancy...isn't it?

- Yes, yes but...it is a totally incorrect estimate. Or he has simply lost confidence in the inspections and so just wrote whatever.

He just shits all over it, isn't that right?

- He knows that it is very difficult to correctly guess.

Is guessing what it is about?

- Yes...that's the question.

And false reports cause problems, admits Anton Paulrud:

- The problem is of course when researchers use this to set new quotas.

But what do the guys on the boats say when you tell them that it can't be like this?

- You mean like that? No, you do not attack an individual. But we have discussed this very, very much. How can we do the quota composition in the right way?

Anton Paulrud thinks it is difficult to estimate which type of fish one will catch in the trawl and that the inspectors do not tell the whole truth. He shows a picture, taken in connection with an inspection of a boat in Denmark, 28 buckets of fish where it can be difficult to distinguish the species after the fish have been in the cargo hold of the boat for several days.

- If you take on finger and rub it on the belly you can feel that there are spicules, that is the only way you can distinguish a herring from a sprat.

And he hopes that in the future boats can be equipped with some sort of automatic fish counter that gives a better picture of what is being fished up.

But even if fishermen do falsely report, it does not affect fish stocks in the say, he says:

- It is a credibility problem, it is not a problem with the stocks. It does not really influence anything to the extent that we fish something out. But it is still a credibility problem, especially when journalists get hold of it.

But is the problem when journalists get hold of it, isn't the problem that it happens?

- Well...it is very important that the figures of catches from the Baltic Sea are correct. So if I'm sitting here again one year later, will it look better then? I hope so, I hope so. We are working very hard at this.

The Agency

How then can it be that fishermen have been able to submit false reports for many years? The Swedish Agency for Marine and Water Management in Gothenburg is responsible for inspecting fishing in Sweden, but not abroad.

But last year, the Danish Fisheries Agency initiated a collaboration with the Swedish Agency after they began to see clear differences between what the Swedish fishermen reported and what the Danish inspections showed.

The Danish Fisheries Agency together with the Swedish Agency for Marine and Water Management conducted inspections of Swedish boats in Danish harbours in Jutland between January and March this year.

The report states that fishermen are increasing their turnover at the expense of the sustainable utilisation of marine resources. And in that report the same pattern shown in Kaliber's investigation is seen: repeated false reporting. According to the Swedish Agency for Marine and Water Management, the fishermen reported on average 56% of herring in their catches, but the inspections showed something else, 27%.

Anna Söderblom and Martin Bjerner are heads of unit for inspections at the Agency:

Are you surprised by these numbers?

- Yes, we certainly are, I think Anna, one had expected it to be better.

The figures are the basis for estimating the size of stocks in the sea. Would it not be good if these were correct and consistent with the reality?

- Obviously. If we had the opportunity to inspect 100% of all the landings and quota settlements then that would be good. But then we need more resources for that.

Do you know that there have been differences for many years when people have landed fish in Skagen, Grenå, Hirtshals, Tyborön?

- I wouldn't say that we knew it was wrong. We have seen it now and recently and have taken action in the short and longer term.

When did you realise this?

- Last year, maybe years.

Shouldn't you have done these checks longer ago?

- No, I don't think we should have done this earlier. Denmark is responsible for those landings regardless of which country the catch comes from.

- Exactly and therefore it is maybe Denmark that needs to increase their work with inspections.

Is it needed?

- That depends on how you see it...but it is clear that with more resources, more inspections could have been conducted and that would have been good.

Researcher Joakim Hjelm in Lysekil says that what fishermen report about their catches has to be more accurate:

- They must realise that they benefit from providing the correct information. I fully understand that there can be small mistakes because these are large catches and it can take days to unload. But we need better statistics that this.

For the question of the Swedish Agency for Marine and Water Management, those who have ultimate responsibility for controlling the Swedish fishing fleet, whether they do enough – he answers:

- Given that one sees this then one can question it.

And Joakim Hjelm has concrete advice for Anton Paulrud, CEO for the Swedish pelagic federation:

- Start landing the right stuff.

In Skagen, Kasper Schou, head of the Danish Fisheries Agency control department in northern Jutland, lets his eyes sweep towards the trawlers in the harbour. Here there are trawlers not just from Sweden and Denmark but from several countries around the Baltic. And he believes that false reporting is not just happening in the Swedish fleet.

False reporting that risks leading to overfishing and affects the sensitive ecosystem in the Baltic Sea.

- For me this is about having sustainable stocks left so there is fishing for future generations.

And Kasper Schou is convinced that the work of the inspectors makes a difference for life below the surface and for future generations.

ENDS!
