



REFORM PLANS Maria Damanaki, the European commissioner for fisheries and maritime affairs. EC

Problems of scale

Maria Damanaki tells Jennifer Rankin about the challenges she faces in reforming Europe's Common Fisheries Policy

When Maria Damanaki thinks of the task she faces in reforming EU fisheries policy, she remembers a joke her father once told about a nameless war. "Why did you lose the war?", asks one person, and the other says 'First, we didn't have guns; second, there is no second'."

Substitute 'fish' for 'guns' and this explains Damanaki's approach to reform of the EU's Common Fisheries Policy (CFP). "First, we will not have fish. Second, there is no second. It is as simple as that," she says in an interview with *European Voice*. This does not mean that the European Commission doesn't care about fishermen, she insists. "It is not that we are underestimating social conditions, but environmental and social sustainability are linked. If we don't have fish there is nothing to talk about."

Logic does not, however, always translate into EU policy. The Commission wants sustainability of stocks to be the *raison d'être* of future fisheries policy, to avoid short-term fishing interests trumping long-term preservation of stocks. But the European Parliament's fisheries committee says that priorities cannot be established between environmental, economic and social concerns, while dissent can be heard from some fisheries ministries that resist giving the environment greater importance than jobs.

This divergence illustrates the scale of the task facing Damanaki, who, as the European commissioner for fisheries and maritime affairs, is responsible for pushing through a major reform of Europe's CFP. Conservation campaigners are already worried that impetus is fading, as Damanaki prepares to present a plan in spring 2011 for a reform of CFP that will come into force in 2013. Damanaki is less concerned about speed. "I am not concerned about the momentum, what I would like is to be very well prepared...because if member states are not persuaded that this will work, then I really will have a difficult time."

Damanaki, a communist-turned-socialist and veteran of Greek politics, has set herself a clear goal: "My ambition is to leave the stocks five years from now in better condition than I find them." She faces a difficult task: around 88% of European fish stocks are overfished and 30% are endangered.

Protecting stocks

The new commissioner has already taken some unpopular decisions, such as reprimanding six Mediterranean countries - including Greece - for failing to implement an EU regulation to protect stocks. "The case of the general derogation is over," she insists. And she promises to use all the Commission's "weapons" to clamp down on illegal, unregulated and unreported (IUU) fishing - powers under the recently agreed IUU regulation that many "member states have not realised" exist.

The biggest battle came on her first day as commissioner, when she reversed her department's opposition to a trade ban on endangered bluefin tuna. The EU was later outvoted in an international conference on trade in endangered species, and tuna fishing was not prohibited. But despite getting "a rough time" from the industry, and despite this "unsatisfactory outcome", she is optimistic that the fish can be protected. If scientific data due out next October shows that the stock is in trouble, the EU could call on the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas (ICCAT) to close the fishery, or renew its proposal for a trade ban through the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES). "I will react in a proper way to the scientific advice...if the scientific advice says there is no way to improve the stock, we will close the fishery; if it says that we can improve the stock by reducing the quota, we will reduce the quota. If the scientific advice says that we can reduce the fishing stock by limiting the fishing period, we are going to limit the fishing period; if there is no solution we can examine the possibility of going to CITES. What I can say for sure is that the stock will be protected."

However, Damanaki will support the Commission if it decides to prosecute the Netherlands and the UK for voting for tougher protection - contrary to what had been agreed among EU countries - at a CITES conference in March. Doesn't this send a strange message about the EU's intentions to protect tuna? "The most important issue here is the common EU position. What they have done is against the treaties, it is against community law," responds the commissioner.

Although she sticks to the letter of

the treaty, the commissioner would like more non-EU scientists involved in drawing up official advice. Damanaki "trusts our scientific advice", but notes that many do not. For this reason, her department will be asking external researchers to tender for providing advice. Problems also arise when national governments fail to provide scientists with enough data.

In future, she sees a smaller fishing industry selling more valuable fish - although the life-long left-winger insists that fish must not be a food for the rich, and sees a place for small-scale artisanal crews. She also hopes her reforms will mean a simpler CFP, so that her successors are no longer responsible for deciding on the mesh size of each fisherman's nets and exactly how much salmon can be caught.

DAMANAKI ON GREEK DEBT

Maria Damanaki was not a member of the centre-right government that hid the truth about Greece's debt for so many years. But she sees the problem as a collective failure of the Greek political class. "It was our fault; our record is not good." Nevertheless, she thinks it was the right decision for Greece to join the eurozone - describing it as "a great success for Greece and for Europe".

She "cannot say" whether Greece will meet its

debt repayments, but is frustrated that people are overlooking the impact of the austerity measures on Greece. "Some people in Europe have not understood the very real effort people are making," she says, citing budget cuts of 20%-30%. She "well understands" Germany's position, but is confident that European solidarity will win the day. Employing a maritime metaphor, she concludes: "Germany and Greece...are in the same boat, so we have to co-operate."