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The sea is not a factory

THE FISHERIES ministers of the European Union will, in their meeting this month — according to all the signs, such as the reduction of catches to an all-time low and scientific data on a drop in biomass — decide to close the anchovy fishing ground in the Bay of Biscay, which should never have been reopened. The move will come as no surprise to Spanish fishermen, nor to the scientists who last December called on Brussels to take this step. What is surprising is that the representatives of Spain and France at that time persuaded the Commission to open the fishing ground, against the opinion of the fishermen themselves. When there are no fish, political decisions cannot invent them.

Faced with a drastic dwindling of resources, an excess of fishing vessels, and a rise in illegal or massive catches, a change to the structure and activity of fishing fleets to match the available resources in each fishing ground has come to be the central objective both of European Union policy and of international organizations. We are looking not at a concrete problem in one area, but at a problem affecting fishing all over the world.

According to data from the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), some seven percent of fishing grounds worldwide are exhausted, while 70 percent are overfished — a situation which, apart from endangering our resources, substantially increases the cost of the catch. Plans have recently been implemented in Europe's northern seas for the recovery of species such as hake, lobster and cod, while in the Mediterranean a grave threat looms over tuna fisheries due to a major increase in the catch, far beyond the authorized limit. Outside the European Union, over-fishing ranges from the North Atlantic to countries such as our neighbor Morocco, where fleets having no agreements with the EU have swept some fishing grounds clean of cephalopods.

In many cases, however, political criteria prevail against scientific data when it comes to allotting quotas. Governments and fishing industries affected by the problem often establish simplistic correlations between results and quotas achieved, disregarding plans for the maintenance of increasingly scarce resources.

In recent decades, Spain has been one of the defenders of sustainable fisheries. This makes it all the more surprising that Spain has decided to support the reopening of a fishing ground as over-exploited as that of the anchovy. The general deterioration of fishing grounds clearly calls for a policy of sustainable fishing methods and quotas, in which serious information compiled by experts receives priority when it comes to setting limits to the permissible volume of catches. The sea is not a factory that produces fish on the basis of demand. It has its own rules, which have to be respected in order to assure a sustainable future.