

# The impact of **Brexit** on the fish industries in both the EU and the UK



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## What does Brexit mean for the fish industry?

December 24th, 2020 marked the day the Brexit deal between the EU and the UK was finally approved after years of negotiations. While some people saw it as a ‘Christmas miracle’ and a sign of relief, others saw it more as a betrayal and a sacrifice of the fish industry.

Now that the UK is out of the EU, the British fish industry can work towards regaining control of their waters, which was a key part of the Leave Campaign during the 2016 Referendum. For Brexiteers and fishermen in general, the promise made by the UK government to reclaim British waters meant that no foreign vessel would be allowed to catch fish in their waters. Little did they know that the promise was false, and instead, it delivered the opposite of what they were told.

When a deal was reached on Christmas Eve, a day of celebrations for many British families, there was nothing to celebrate. British fishermen discovered with horror and shock that EU boats would continue to be able to fish in UK waters, causing anger and frustration among fishermen in the UK and coastal communities.

Phil Mitchell, a 51-year-old British skipper from Cornwall said: “Boris the betrayer has slayed us and we won’t forget, we had the opportunity to actually take back control and we passed it up. They were happy to use us for their campaign and when push has come to shove, we’ve had the shove and we’ve been dumped on from a great height.”

UK fishermen weren’t the only ones who were unhappy with the Brexit deal. EU fishermen believed the deal was anything but certain and not at all what they expected.

Why has this deal brought so much anger among the parties involved, and what exactly is included in this Brexit deal?



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## The Brexit deal in a nutshell

Since the Brexit deal runs more than 2000 pages, we have made it easier for you by breaking down the key points of the deal regarding the fisheries:

- The 6 to 12-mile zone from the British coastline will remain a fishing ground for EU vessels despite the UK exiting the Common Fisheries Policy (More about the CFP on page 9).
- EU boats will be able to continue their fishing activities in UK waters for 5-and-a-half years, which is called the adjustment period. After the adjustment period, which ends in June 2026, EU access to UK waters and the quota of fish which they are allowed to catch will be negotiated on an annual basis.
- The EU will have to return 25% of their catch in British waters by the fifth year of the adjustment period.
- No tariffs will be imposed on fish products traded between the EU and the UK.

The deal allows UK fishermen to have a greater share of fish, and for EU fishermen the ability to continue using UK waters despite the UK leaving the EU.

However, the UK and the EU are both unhappy with this new deal, with the British arguing that they did not get what was promised by their government, while the EU argues that even though the deal is somewhat favorable to them, it doesn’t provide reassurances on what will happen after the adjustment period.





Fish For Leave campaigners played an important role during the Brexit Referendum. Credit: Maureen McLean/Shutterstock.

## The impact of Brexit on UK fisheries



Barrie Deas was among those expressing their anger towards the Brexit deal. Credit: Photo by Shutterstock.

It is no secret that UK fishermen were left frustrated and disappointed with the new Brexit deal. The majority, if not all of them, felt betrayed by the government because UK fisheries were a crucial part during the Brexit Referendum in 2016. The sector was seen as the major reason why the UK wanted to leave the EU as they wanted to take back control of their waters. It's only once the Brexit deal was agreed that fishermen in the UK realised that they were being used for Boris Johnson's political agenda.

Barrie Deas, the chief executive of

the National Federation of Fishermen's Organisation, said: "The industry as a whole is very disappointed and extremely frustrated because there is a huge gulf between what was promised in terms of how the UK would act as an independent coastal state, the quota shares that would be associated with it and control over access."

He believes all of that was surrendered in the deal in return for access to the EU market.

While the fish industry were confident they would be better off leaving the EU, it has now been confirmed that the fishing sector in the UK will face short-term and long-term damages under the new deal.

Mike Park, the CEO of the Scottish White Fish Producers Association agreed and said: "The Brexit deal is causing us some issues in the short term and even after the transition period of five-and-a-half years it's difficult to see how that position can be improved significantly. We didn't think for one minute we would be in a worse of position than we were while being part of the EU."

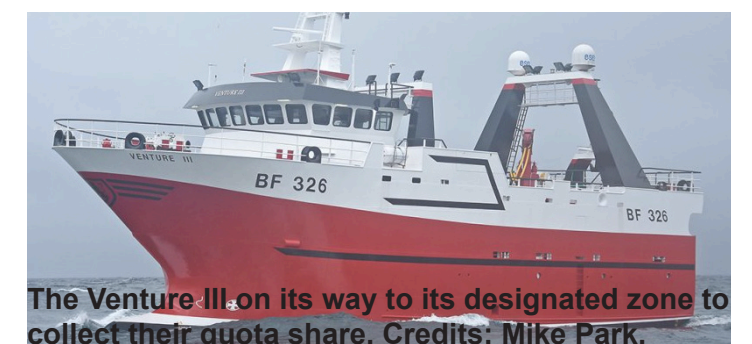
When it comes to looking for someone to blame for the disastrous deal, fishermen in the UK, including Deas and Park, have one name in mind: Boris Johnson.

Deas, who sent a letter to the Prime Minister explaining his frustration, said: "I think the government gave the fishing industry every expectation that we would be and act like an independent coastal state. In the end it capitulated on fish."

This caused fishermen to suspect that the government sacrificed the fish industry for other industries deemed more

important in their eyes, like the energy sector. The fish sector contributes to only 0.1% of the UK's GDP, which could be the reason why the government didn't consider it to be as important as all the other sectors. But for the fishing communities in the UK, it's a lifeline and a way of life that goes back thousands of years.

"We knew the deal was going sour, but they were still on about how good a deal they would deliver for our fishermen. This is a political embarrassment, own it, don't continue telling us how good the laws that you delivered are. It was a disaster, admit it was a disaster and get on with it," said Park. (Continued on page 5)



The Venture III on its way to its designated zone to collect their quota share. Credits: Mike Park.





Despite the happy faces, these fishermen feel like they have been let down by their own government.  
Credits: Barrie Deas.



Horeca (the hospitality sector in the EU) has been shut down causing a lot of fish to go to waste. Credits: Dinendra Haria/LNP/Shutterstock

### The Adjustment Period and then what ?

Under the new deal, European boats have the right to continue using UK waters for 5-and-a-half years, something which the British did not want, instead they wanted the EU to be completely banned. After this 5-year period, there will be annual negotiations between both sides on water access and quota shares, but despite having these planned, the British are uncertain of what might happen during these negotiations.

Barrie Deas provided two views, an optimistic one and a pessimistic one.

**Optimistic view:** “The optimistic view would be that annual agreements are where the UK can use its leverage on access because the EU fleet fish about 5 or 6 times as much in UK waters as UK vessels fish in EU waters.”

**Pessimistic View:** “We will find ourselves in the same situation where big power politics comes into play, we will continue to be held in a kind of neo-colonial relationship to the EU on fisheries.”

### 25% returned, is that enough?

25% of the EU’s catch value in UK waters has to be returned to the British fleet by the fifth year of the adjustment period. That would be approximately £137 million. Even though that seems like a huge amount of money, the UK argues it’s not enough and would have preferred 80%.

Mike Park agreed and said: “A lot of the 25% is made of pelagic and fish that is of no value to us, like the dover sole, because we don’t catch it anyway. The 25% of the value very much hides the reality of the situation.”

On top of being offered an unfavorable deal, the sector has been heavily hit by the Covid pandemic. Fish products such as scallops, crabs, lobsters, shellfish and white fish go to the high end restaurants in both the EU and the UK but because the hospitality sector has been shut down and the demand has decreased, UK vessels have been landing less for less money.

Now that we know the UK’s view on the deal, let’s cross the channel and find out what the EU’s view is on the deal.

The Brexit deal hasn’t been too cruel towards the European fishing sectors. EU vessels got what they wanted, which is continued access to UK waters. But that is only for 5-and-a-half years, and on top of that, the EU fleet suffered a loss of quota as they have to return some of it to the UK as part of the deal.

Gerard Van Ballsfoort, the chair of the European Fisheries Alliance, claimed that if no deal had been struck, European fishermen wouldn’t have been so advantageous compared to their UK counterpart.

He said: “If there was no deal, I would assume that the UK would have given us no access to their waters and all EU fishermen would have to fish in

EU waters, and that would’ve been a worst-case scenario for us.”

While the UK argues that the deal is a win-lose situation in favour of the EU, the EU claims it’s a lose-lose situation.

If we look at just the fish sector, the EU has to return 25% of their quota back to the UK, making it a win-lose situation for them, but if we look at fish exports, the UK loses in this situation because 80% of their quota is sold to Europeans, something that will not be happening anymore now that they left the EU.

(Continued on page 7)

# Brexit & the EU



Gerard Van Ballsfoort was a key figure during the Brexit negotiations on EU fisheries. Credits: Gerard Van Ballsfoort.



If there is one winner with this Brexit deal, it's the Scottish Pelagic Industry.

Van Ballsfoort said: “These millionaires in Scotland have a lot of extra mackerel and haring that goes to Norway and Africa because we Europeans don't eat it, They are the few winners with this deal I would say.”

The Europeans' only problem with this deal is the fact they are losing quota to the British. However, there are some member states who are more heavily impacted compared to others, such as Belgium.

The Belgians have 50% of their fishing activities in British waters, resulting in a good cooperation with British ports. Their fleet would land all their catches in British ports because their fishing grounds were closer to those ports than to Belgian ports. So, they would man their fish there and then transport them back to the first selling point in Belgium. Now, because of Brexit, they are no longer able to call in British ports, which is something they are hoping to get restored.

Emiel Brouckaert, the chief executive of a Belgian fishing organisation, said: “Production wise and fishing opportunity wise it's difficult to say because our fishing operations and plans have changed now that we can't call into British ports. It's uncertain and difficult to predict what will happen.”

The uncertainty facing the fisheries after the Adjustment Period is what worries the Europeans the most because the British could decide to restrict access to their waters if they wanted to, which would cause a bigger problem than there already is.

**The Adjustment Period followed by uncertainty**

The feeling all over Europe is a feeling of uncertainty, and after having spoken to a couple of representatives of European fisheries, the general consensus is that no one trusts the UK.

Pim Visser, the director of VisNed, an association of cutter fishermen, said: “I'm worried about it but I don't know what to expect. You never know what the new political situation will be in 2026 both in the UK and in the EU, but the feeling in the UK is so negative, I fear

that they want to restrict access and they want extras in 2026.”

**25% returned, is that too much?**

During the negotiations, the UK wanted 80% of the EU's catch value in British waters to be returned to the UK, but the EU pushed to return only 25%, which ended up being the agreed deal.

However, there are many fishermen in the EU who disagreed with this percentage, and instead wanted it to be lower.

Gerard Van Ballsfoort was one of the many who pushed for 0%.

He said: “0%, that was our starting point. We give them free access to our market and we get free access to their waters and we stick to the quota that we have agreed in the late 70s and 80s, which the UK was part of.”

Visser agreed and said: “The North Sea is one ecosystem, which we have divided. It's not a UK sea, it's not a Dutch sea, it's not an EU sea, it's a joint sea. So you can't divide up what is jointly yours. It's a joint situation and it's a joint responsibility, so this whole Brexit idea of zonal attachment is absolutely ludicrous for the north sea situation.”

Despite wanting 0%, the EU knew better than to push for that because they knew the UK wouldn't adhere, and that would eventually result in a no-deal, meaning there would be no access to UK waters for EU boats and vice versa, as well as no trade deal, and eventually, tariffs would be imposed.

This would definitely be a lose-lose situation for both sides, and fishermen would be even angrier than they are today.

A topic that sparked controversy between both sides was the Common Fisheries Policy, which is a fisheries policy set by the EU that determines the quota of fish that each member state can catch in a specific region.

One of the reasons why the UK wanted to leave the EU was to exit the CFP. Flip the page to find out why.



British fishermen were happy about one aspect of the Brexit deal, and that was to exit the CFP. Credits: Vickie Flores/EPA-EFE/Shutterstock

What exactly is the CFP?

- The Common Fisheries Policy is an agreement in which a set of measures like fishing quotas and catch levels are determined by the European Commission.
- EU nations do not control their own territorial waters or set their own quotas to catch fish, the CFP is in charge of that.
- All EU countries with a fish industry and a coastline share their waters with each other, and all have the right to fish in each other's waters, with the EU setting catch levels for each country in each specific area.

CFP, a fair agreement to the UK?

The UK has the largest and most productive fishing ground in Europe, which is why the demand for EU access in UK waters is huge.

On the other hand, since the UK already has a large body of water and most of their products are caught in their own waters, British fishermen have little reason in going to European waters.

To put this into a statistic, in 2015, EU vessels caught 683,000 tonnes and raising £484 million in revenue in UK waters, while UK vessels only caught 111,000 tonnes and raising £114 million in revenue in European waters.

It is safe to say that the UK's decision to exit the CFP is justified as they are losing out fish quota from their own waters because the EU fishermen take a larger share of fish in British waters compared to British fishermen.

Statistics provided by the European Commission show that European fishermen take 173 times more herring, 45 times more whiting, 16 times more mackerel and 14 times more haddock and cod out of UK waters than British fishermen do.

Now you know where the “Let's take back control of our waters” slogan stemmed from.





**This fisherman would lose a big share of his langoustines under the CFP. Credits: Barrie Deas**

## What the UK said:

“One of the criticisms of the CFP is that it’s very top down and very dictatorial. You didn’t involve those that you were trying to manage and that was the big weakness of the CFP. We will create our own national fishing plans, at national level or regional level, and hope that over time, in the next 2 to 3 years we could construct something that allows us to operate more sensibly within the fisheries framework.”

**-Mike Park**

“The CFP as an institution has been a fairly disastrous set of arrangements. One of the good things that came out of leaving the EU, is the ability to manage our own fisheries. Over time there will be an evolution and we will move away from rules that were designed in the plight under the CFP to something much more agile, focussed on individual fishing plans for individual fisheries, and I think there is great scope there to do a lot better than we’ve done under the CFP.”

**-Barrie Deas**

## What the EU said:

“Despite its numerous flaws, it did help the evolution of all the fleets towards a sustainable situation. We have to say, going from a very unsustainable situation in the 1970s-80s, even into the 90s, gradually into this century we moved into sustainable fisheries for all countries including the UK. It has many flaws that needed to be addressed and it’s unfortunate that now with Brexit we have to deal with these issues separately from the UK instead of together.” **-Emiel Brouckaert**

“There’re two things; sustainability and level playing field. Those are the two key words. If you look at the map of the European seas, and if you just split them according to a member state, then the Dutch have a very small continental shelf, the Belgian even smaller and we have to fish in each other’s waters. So, there’s no such things as bilateral in Europe. The commonality in the CFP is joint management, sustainable management, joint fishing opportunities and a single market without any tariff barriers. Level playing field is key.”

**-Pim Visser**

“Fisheries management in the North East Atlantic has been quite successful. The CFP is complicated and sometimes tiresome, but it has delivered relatively healthy stocks. You can see that since we reduced the fleets everywhere on the Atlantic side of Europe, it resulted in a lower fishing pressure, and that’s management. In order to have a good fishing management people have to collaborate, work together and agree on rules and comply with the rules, and we had that, but now the assumption of continuing with a good fishing management has become a question mark because the UK has now it’s own fisheries bill with objectives that are not entirely aligned with EU objectives because of their ideology of sovereignty and regulatory autonomy is strongly embedded in the UK government at the moment.” **-Gerard Van Ballsfoort**

# Quota swapping

Quota swapping is the process in which fishermen from the EU swap some of the fish they caught, which they don’t need, with unwanted fish caught by UK fishermen. This process allows each member state to reach the level of fish quota they need, which is allocated by the CFP.

Since fishermen cannot specifically locate certain types of fish, what they do is they go to their allocated region, catch fish in that area and then sort out which species they want and which species they have no use for. Once they have done that, they contact the member state that will want that specific type of fish and once they meet they swap the fish they don’t want with the fish they need.

Park, who is a big fan of the process, said: “We did this in a producer organisation to a producer organisation basis. So, for example, an organisation in Scotland would contact an organisation in the Netherlands because we would want cod, which they had, and they would want nephrops, which we had. We would make the deal and the government would do it with the government of that member state, they would ratify it.”

The process is of benefit to both sides, yet due to Brexit, quota swapping is now removed because the UK is no longer part of the EU. Instead, the EU and the UK are



**Fishermen was the fish before sorting them. Credits: Vickie Flores/EPA-EFE/Shutterstock**

working together to find a new system that would allow quota swapping between the EU and a country outside the bloc.

Brouckaert was also a big fan of the process and said: “We’ve been in contact with our British colleagues, who are also very much in favour to find a way to come back to it, eventhough right now it’s difficult to negotiate this because we’re dealing with a country that is outside the bloc, but somehow we should be able to find a solution to quota swaps that we used to have, which was useful for both parties.”

According to the European Commission, there is already a mechanism in place which would replace the old quota swapping process, but no one in the EU or the UK believes it will be as efficient as the old process, and instead, they think it will cause an even greater loss of quota on both sides and more tensions between UK and EU fishermen.



**Fish are sorted into “Fish needed” and “Fish discarded,”. Credit: Vickie Flores/ EPA-EFE/Shutterstock**



# The relationship between

# EU & UK fishermen

## History of conflicts at sea

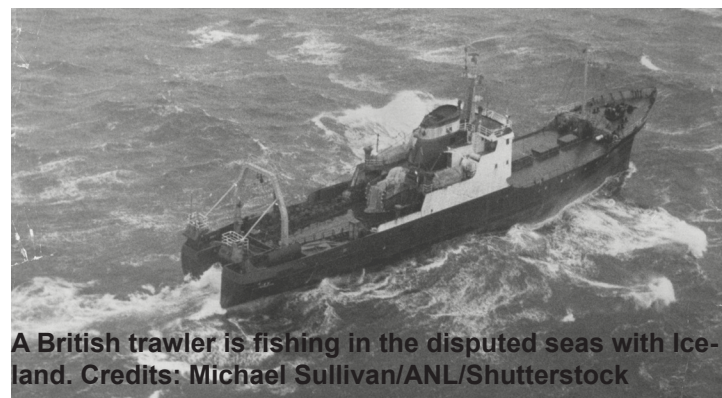
### The cod wars

The first official fishing conflict between European nations began in the late 80s to early 90s when the British replaced their sail trawlers with steam trawlers. This new technology allowed British boats to sail for longer and travel further away from British ports to countries like Greenland, Iceland and the Faroe Islands, all while towing larger nets.

However, it became quickly noticeable that this new method of fishing was having a negative impact on fishing stocks and their habitat. Fishing became unsustainable and catches had declined to their lowest point.

Since it wasn't possible to fish in UK waters anymore due to the loss of fish stocks, the fleet turned to new waters, namely the Icelandic waters.

The British fleet, with their new trawlers, damaged the Icelandic seafloor, resulting in Iceland creating a 12-mile zone



A British trawler is fishing in the disputed seas with Iceland. Credits: Michael Sullivan/ANL/Shutterstock

around their country to prevent any foreign boats from fishing in their waters. The British would force their way into the Icelandic waters while being escorted by the British navy. It resulted in a game of cat and mouse between Icelandic coastguards and British trawlers but major incidents were avoided.

After some negotiations, Iceland allowed the UK conditional access into their waters, but the UK quickly took advantage of that access and began to overfish. It resulted in more clashes between both countries and the first ever casualty.

Eventually NATO intervened and an agreement was reached in 1976, because both industries came to an agreement on which allowed 30 British vessels access to Iceland's waters for six months. how many scallops should be taken each year.

It had a significant impact on the UK economy as it cost 1500 jobs in British fish ports. In 2018, however, the conflict between the French and the British over scallops reemerged as British boats entered the Bay of Seine once again to fish for delicious French scallops.

The UK, as a result of Iceland's water restrictions, implemented their own restricted zone of 200 miles. By 1982, every nation followed the same example. This was called the Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ).

### The scallop wars

The main rival to the British on the seas are the French. Both countries have always been arguing with each other, but the real conflict began in 2012 when British fishermen decided to enter the Bay of Seine in the English Channel to dredge for scallops. Apart from those two conflicts, it's relatively calm on the seas...until Brexit came.

The French accused them of entering the 12-mile zone in France's waters yet the British until today argue that they were 15 miles off the French coast. French fishing boats arrived in the Bay of Seine to intercept the British boats, they threw rocks and iron bars at them and some even laid ropes to prevent them from fishing. The French also forced the British vessels to pay heavy fines, with one of the vessels being forced to release everything they caught that day. The conflict died down over the years



Fishermen carry no weapons and their boats are not built to defend themselves against potential attacks. Credits: Gerard Van Ballsfoort



Brexit has caused many verbal disputes between European nations and the UK, but when it comes to physical conflicts at seas, apart from the Scallop war in 2018 and the recent short Jersey blockade imposed by the French around the port of St Helier in Jersey, the relationship between European and British fishermen is generally good.

One of the reasons why there are rarely any conflicts between fishermen is due to the fact that almost every country respects each other's rules to avoid conflicts like the cod wars or the scallop wars.

Emiel Brouckaert said: "We're too small to cause conflicts with other countries. We never had any conflicts with the French because we tend to follow their local rules because of our relationship with the French and because we want to remain on good terms. If there's a situation where we can avoid conflicts we will take that option."

The Belgian representative believes finding compromises is the best way to avoid conflicts and allow everyone to continue to do what they are here to do: fish.

He said: "I haven't heard any conflicts lately, the one that occurred in 2018 was because it was a huge UK fleet that entered that zone and they didn't follow the rules that the French had established. They were entitled to do that because they only have to follow EU rules, they're not bound to follow local French rules but sometimes you must make compromises in order to avoid conflicts, and that's what the Belgians are good

at. Finding compromises in order to allow everyone to get on with their business without delays."

Park agrees with Brouckaert but argues that there are instances where countries compete against each other for space.

He said: "On a high official level we get on well, but we do currently have some issues on the high seas. We have it in-shore between scallop vessels and squid vessels, and offshore we have some conflicts with Spanish boats working with gill nets and lines. It's mostly conflicts revolved around competition for space rather than groups of fishermen ganging together to do unlawful things, but that's something that has been managed going forward."

For the Dutch, the situation is different as they barely see English fishermen in the north sea, where they fish, because Brexit has caused them to either sell their licences to Scottish pelagic trawlers or just change fishing regions. As a result, there are no conflicts between the Dutch and the British.

Pim Visser said: "There are not so many English fishermen left in the north sea, and for the few that are there, they get along not too bad with other Europeans. They got this madness of Brexit in their minds where they thought that they would rule the seas again and they would be the bosses etc. and now they've come back to reality. In Dutch there is a saying, you only wake up when you get a very cold shower, and I think they got a very cold shower."



The relationship between UK and EU fishermen is generally as calm as this water. Credits: Barrie Deas

# Brexit...What happens now?

For now, both the UK and the EU know what is expected of them in this Brexit deal that was agreed on the 24th of December 2020. The EU will continue to have access to UK waters for a couple of years, and the UK are receiving a larger share of fish quota. But what will happen after the Adjustment period? Will countries continue to respect the Brexit deal or are we bound to see even more conflicts compared to pre-Brexit? The majority of fishermen on both sides have mixed feelings, but the most recurring opinion is that relationships and tensions between both economic powers will deteriorate after the Adjustment period.

Van Ballsfoort said: "If the UK starts negotiating in 2026 and start saying that they want to limit access entirely it will definitely cause tensions and conflicts among EU and UK fishermen. Usually, people stick to the rules, so I don't see this happening, but then again it will really depend on the position taken by the UK because they are known to break their promises, they disrespected the Withdrawal agreement twice now, this is why the Commission has announced a legal infringement against the UK because they don't keep their promises. I would say that the level of trust between the EU and the UK has been reduced significantly. In the fisheries sector, it's the same, we don't really trust the UK anymore. It's a pity but it's a fact of life."

There have been rumours that after the Adjustment period, the UK would fully restrict access to their waters, causing the EU to respond by imposing taxes on British exports to the EU or simply blocking access to British boats to EU waters.

Park believes restricted access and taxes imposed on goods will never happen because both sides are bound by the Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA).

He said: "We live in an era where Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated fishing (IUU) is not tolerated. There is no way the EU will tolerate any of their member state vessels operating illegally, just as the UK would not tolerate us operating illegally as well. Everyone will try to live as harmoniously as we possibly can, although you may get skirmishes at the edges."

For Barrie Deas, it's another story, the chief executive of the NFFO believes the issue will never be solved because the UK has been disadvantageous since the very beginning.

He said: "The fishing issue will remain toxic as it has done for 40 years because the terms the UK entered the EEC on fisheries were weighted very heavily against the UK. That has created tensions within the relationship between the UK and the EU and then they bubbled to the surface in the referendum, fishing became something of a poster child for Brexit. That's why I think you won't see it all the time but I think it will bubble to the surface and remain there until that anomaly is resolved."

Fishermen will have to wait five-and-a-half years in order to find out what comes next after the Adjustment period. Until then, tensions will rise because of the current disagreements and the uncertainty felt on both sides.

One thing is for certain, it's a terrible time to be a fisherman, whether you're European or British, both of them are losing something, whether it's fish quotas, access or just money in general. The governments in the EU and the UK have sacrificed their fish sectors and abandoned their fishermen...and they are not ready to be forgiven.