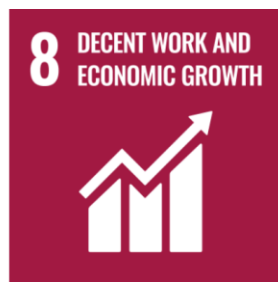


When the Boat Comes in

An Entire Industry Fails to Grasp the Marketing Concept

UNSDG Relevance



Keywords: Marketing Concept, Marketing Environment, Brexit, Regulation, Fishing

Written by Michael Harker and Thomas McAlinden

‘When the Boat Comes in’ is an old, old song from the coastal towns of Northumbria. As a folk, song, there are many different versions of the lyrics, but the most famous one was sung by Alex Glasgow – in a real Geordie accent mind. Not the diluted modern version. You can listen to it on YouTube.

Here’s the first verse:

*Come here, my little Jacky
Now I’ve smoked my backy
Let’s have a bit of cracky
Till the boat comes in
Dance to thy daddy, sing to thy mammy,
Dance to thy daddy, to thy mammy sing:
Though shalt have a fishy on a little dishy,
Though shalt have a fishy when the boat comes in*

The surface reading is of members of a family having a little fun together, whilst waiting for the working men to return. There is plenty of subtext though. *Backy* means tobacco – which probably meant a pipe, and *cracky* is from Middle English – so a very old word – meaning loud/boisterous conversation. Etymologically it’s related to *craic* – an Irish word borrowed from Scots/English and then borrowed back by English speakers on the

mainland in the 20th century. Many folk songs and rhymes have deeper and darker subtexts though, and this one is no exception. The child will be fed – IF the boat comes back, not when.

Fishing even now is a dangerous business, and that is with good communications, navigational and fish detection technology and larger and more robust boats. In the 19th and for most of the 20th century it meant a small wooden boat without even a radio – and only experience to allow weather prediction. So, every time the little boats went out to sea, it was far from guaranteed they would all come back with a good catch, if they came back at all.

The picture below was taken by the photographer Chris Killip in 1983 just off a Northumbrian village called Skinningrove. It's name is '*Simon being taken to sea for the first time since his father drowned*'. In many coastal communities until recently, fishing and other sea industries were what most men did in their working lives, and a family couldn't let a child become scared of the sea – especially when the main family breadwinner had died. So no soft treatment for an 11 year old boy.



'Simon being taken to sea for the first time since his father drowned' – Chris Killip

The issues mentioned are an example of social and cultural embeddedness – fishing is deep within the foundations of 21st century Britain, even if very few people these days are directly engaged with it – indeed, it has romanticism and assigned importance way out of

line with its actual significance. Rugged white men, heroically setting off to conquer the ocean, wearing the heck out of their Arran sweaters. It is for these reasons it was selected by right-wing agitators like Nigel Farage, who exploited its coding of independent men fighting against the tyrannical impositions of the European Union to achieve his political ends. British Fish for British Fishermen!

Let's have a dose of reality though. Firstly, how important is fishing in the UK economy when examined using objective numbers rather than subjective prejudices?

From UK Government statistics, we can see that UK Fishing in 2022 directly employed about 10,000 people and the value of fish landed was a smidge over £1bn. Figures that mark a long term decline in both regards.

To put that into context, Poundland, an unromantic retailer of boring items employs 18,000 people – mostly women with a mix disproportionately high in respect of ethnic minority representation. In their accounts submitted to Companies House in 2023 the company states its revenue as being £1.7bn. And growing.

So, considered objectively UK fishing is collectively worth about 60% of a single boring retailer which has been battered by Covid, Amazon and Brexit. There is also a whole discussion about how the work of women is perceived and valued compared to that of men, but this isn't the place for it. If you end up in that place, be sure to include at least one woman in the discussion though!

Further, those restrictions and quotas imposed through collective-agreement [after reports from an EU Fisheries Committee which Farage made sure he was a member of – and never attended a session of] weren't about persecuting British fishermen, but about protecting fish stocks as a sustainable resource over the medium term and long term – and therefore the communities that depended on them for their economic wellbeing.

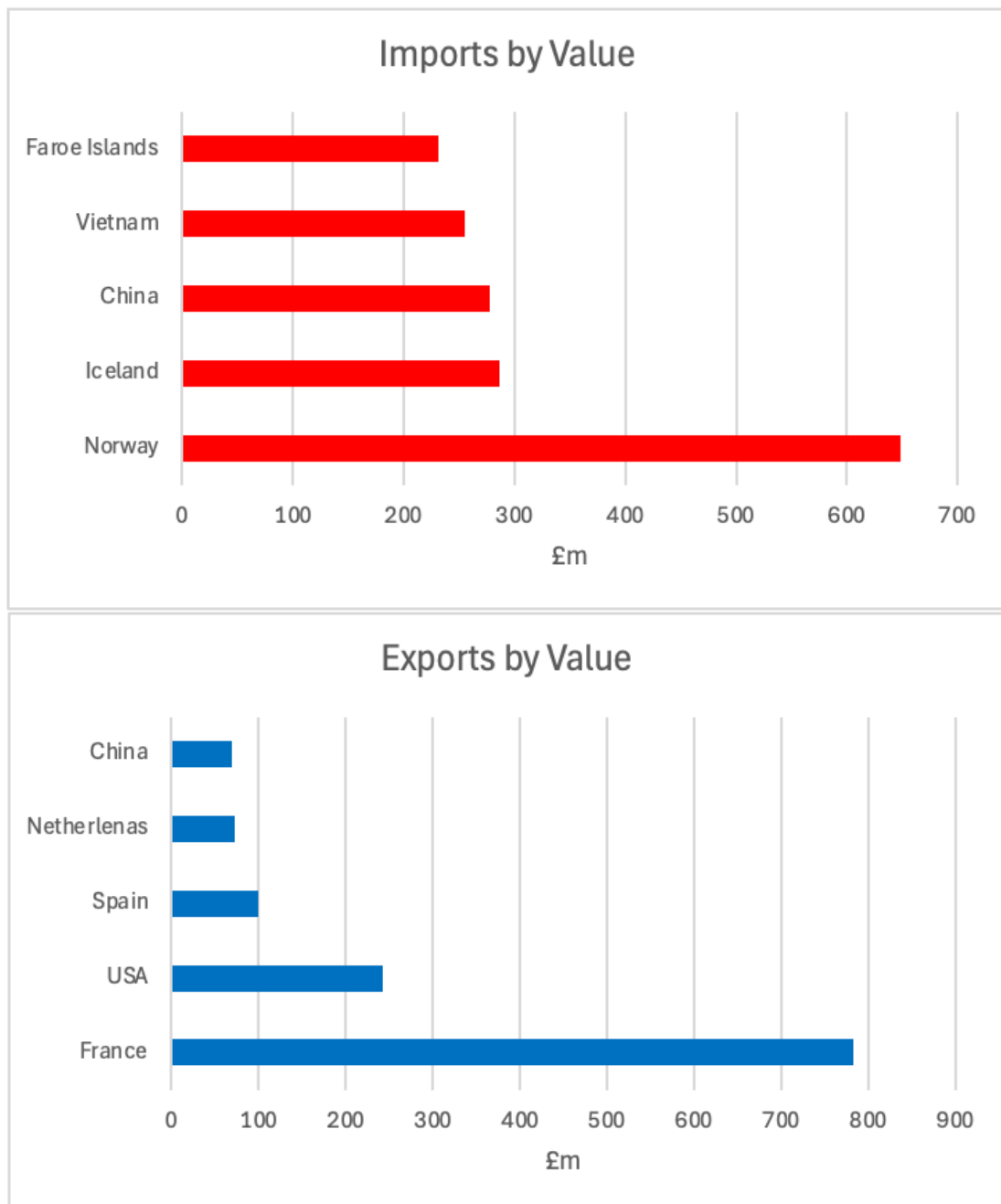
The themes above are examples of how issues combine and mix – society, culture, politics, economics and so on – and therefore need to be comprehended as the context of business by any organisation. We call it the Marketing Environment. Consider the frameworks you were exposed to early in your learning about Marketing that are about collating and interpreting these topics – the Marketing Environment onion, Porter's 5 Forces, SWOT and PEST analyses and so on. It's one of the most fundamental ideas that we have, and informs and underpins many of the others.

It is a second foundational idea in Marketing that UK Fishing revealed it had no understanding of, by joyously protesting that the UK should leave the European Union and thereby making its own death spiral more likely. To wit, the Marketing Concept. Let's remind ourselves of the definition:

*The **marketing concept** holds that achieving organisational goals depends on knowing the needs and wants of target markets and delivering the desired satisfactions better than competitors do*

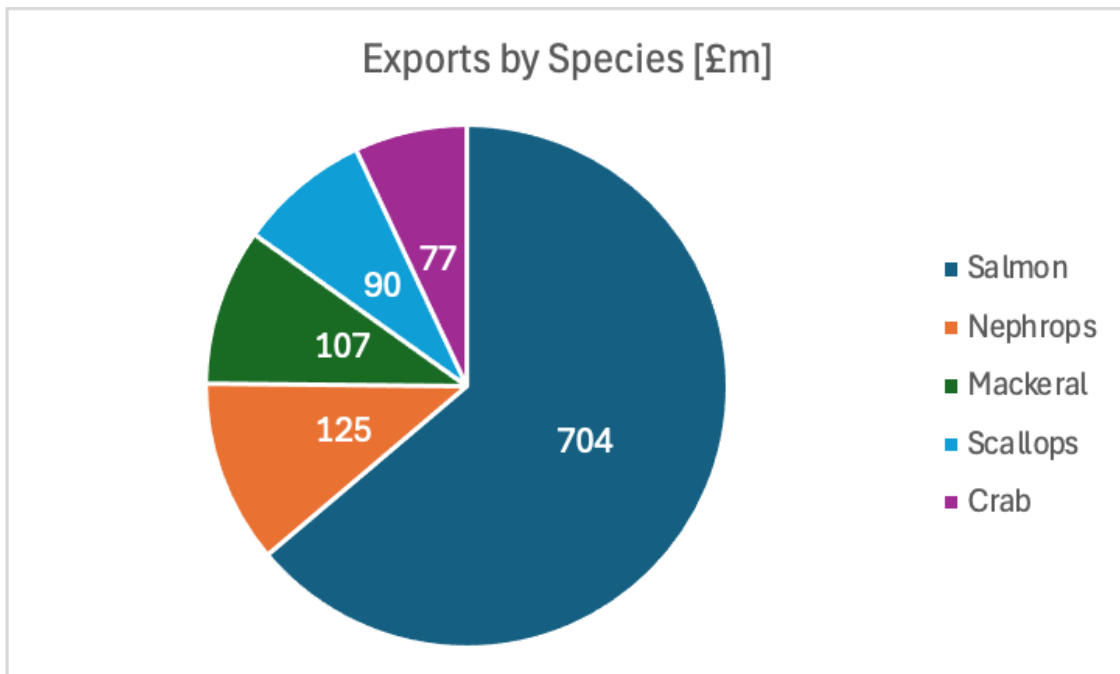
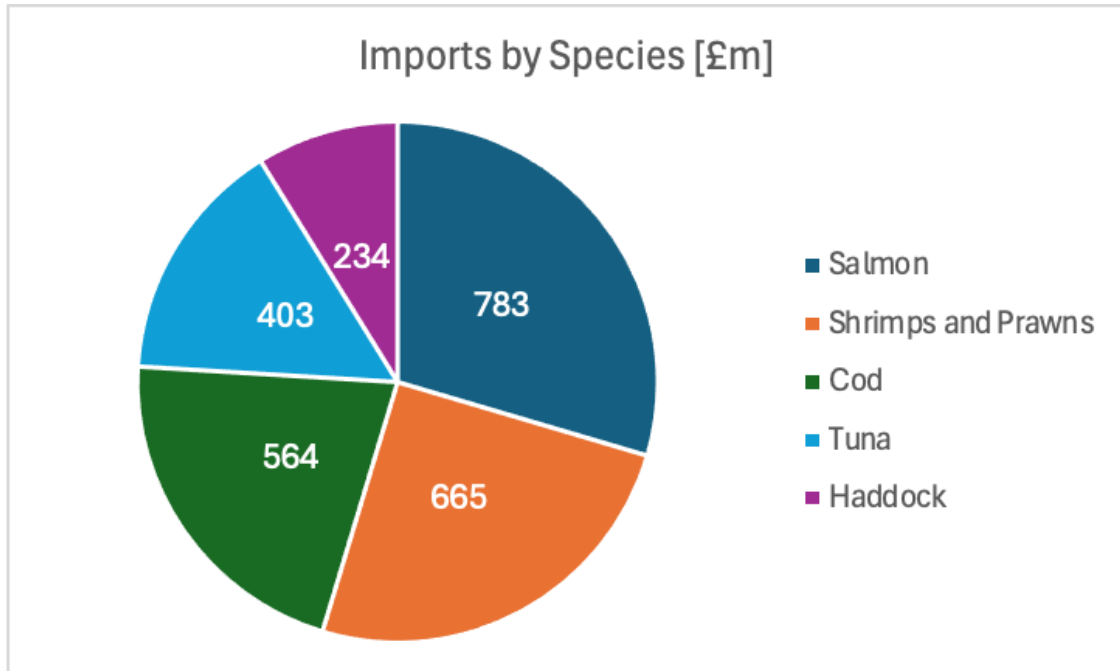
To put it simply, understand what people want – and how and why - and then supply it to them.

How and why did this deepen the crisis in UK fishing? Their reality was that fish caught by British boats were desired by customers on mainland Europe, and not by the domestic population of the UK. Conversely, fleets from other EU countries were selling their catch to UK customers. Essentially fish were being swapped and everyone was getting what they wanted. Post the exit from the EU Internal Market, and thereby raising of significant trade barriers against UK imports into that market, this was no longer the case. This becomes apparent by looking at the figures we have for imports and exports – exports differ from the above value of £1bn as they also include other seafood sectors, such as farmed salmon.



Figures from Seafish.org

Cod and haddock for your fish and chips are imported rather than being caught in UK waters, and despite any impression you might have had, more salmon was coming into the UK than was being shipped out. Nephrops means langoustines and similar, much sought after by French but not British chefs.



Figures from Seafish.org

To put it brutally, the whole industry hadn't thought to ask the question 'Ok, after we've caught the fish, what is Step 2?'.

It had been selling the fish to predominantly EU based customers, but the new trade barriers meant costs and much lower profits, inconvenience and - above all - time wasting. People want to buy fresh fish, not a product that has been sitting around for a week getting stinky! This is an almost perfect definition of the Production Concept – which is a category of error companies make when they focus exclusively on producing their goods, and not on the market in which they intend to sell them.

To add salt to the wound, the UK hasn't been able to impose equivalent restrictions on EU exporters into the UK, because of the complexity of setting up the system and the damage it would do the wider economy.

So, imagine you are newly appointed to advise the industry. Local customers don't want many of your fish, and accessing customers that do want them is problematic. Worse, overseas competitors can access your local market far more conveniently than you can access theirs – and the locals prefer their fish to the ones you catch.

What can you possibly do to save this industry?

Case Questions

1. Can you think of other example industries where importance is cultural and social rather economic? How about industries that matter in terms of revenue and employment, but have no romance associated with them?
2. Did the photo of Simon cause a reaction in you?
3. Can you think of other sectors of the economy, or particular companies that have a Production, rather than a Market Concept and this is causing problems for them?
4. How aware are you of where your seafood comes from? Is its origin important to you?
5. Can you think of any way out of the hole other than by the UK coming to an agreement with EU partners to reduce and remove trade barriers? What would the UK offer in return for this privilege – remember, EU importers into the UK don't face the same level of reciprocal barrier.
6. Should sectors like fishing be left to die of natural causes? If not, why not?

References and Sources:

It could be argued that the UK Parliament produces reports on fishing more because of its cultural importance than its economic importance. Poundland doesn't get its own committee. Reports from this part of the Government can be found here: <https://www.gov.uk/environment/marine>

The EU wide equivalent reporting can be found here: https://oceans-and-fisheries.ec.europa.eu/fisheries_en

The work and life of the photographer of working class communities – Chris Killip – can be found and explored here: <https://www.chriskillip.com>

Companies House has oversight of UK listed businesses. Much information is legally required to be submitted into this public domain, and it's a good place to look for information about particular companies: <https://www.gov.uk/get-information-about-a-company>

The definition of the Marketing Concept comes from Armstrong, Kotler, Harker and Brennan (2019) *Marketing: An Introduction 4e* by Pearson

The numbers on seafood imports and exports come from the industry body Seafish at <https://www.seafish.org/about-us/>