

“Sharing the seas”

Michael Grey Monday, 10 March 2008

IT IS curious to reflect how our view of the oceans has changed in recent years. It was not that long ago, after all, that 'territorial' seas extended no more than three miles offshore, supposedly because this was the range of the average cannon. The fact that this notion managed to survive into the age of the Inter-Continental Ballistic Missile was perhaps more a reflection on our attention being fixed on other places than the sea.

Today we have a more realistic view of the seas and oceans and a willingness to confront the fact that salt water is a shared asset. It may not be quite the common heritage of mankind that causes twitching among those who have the capability of drilling for oil in the deep oceans or seeking out manganese nodules under the Arctic icefields, but we don't get angry about the idea that the sea is the exclusive preserve of ships.

We would rather that coastal states did not behave like the Californians, the French and Spanish and attempt to exert unilateral control over shipping upon its lawful business. Becoming more accustomed to surveillance, we can just about cope with demands for long-range identification. And we don't leap on our high horses when coastal states ask ships to report their passage, and the cargo they are carrying, because it doesn't seem to be unreasonable. We are learning to 'share' the sea we all have a stake in.

In an earlier career I used to work at the UK Chamber of Shipping, where one of my jobs was to provide a shipping industry reaction to requests by the offshore oil industry to place their platforms, rigs and pipelines in the North Sea. My humble role was to ascertain the views of the Marine Superintendents' Panel and communicate these to the Department of Energy. Invariably every one of my Supers — a terrifying bunch when they actually had to meet — would object vociferously to these requests, citing navigational obstruction, the belief that if an obstruction was put in a seaway, somebody would invariably bump into it, and usually some highfaluting phrases about inhibitions to the "freedom of the seas" being imposed by these Johnny-come-lately offshore nuisances.

These views, couched in the ingratiating and conciliatory terms which were our specialty, were then forwarded to the energetic Department of Energy, who would (as we knew they

would), energetically ignore them. The oil and gas had to come ashore, no matter what, and they weren't going to let a gang of superannuated sailors interfere with their political imperatives. But they had gone through the process of 'consultation', a system which we today are quite used to, as our political masters busily shut down our hospitals, schools, and post offices, all after they have consulted us.

I have occasionally looked back on this futile and unrewarding period of my life, but recall with admiration the way that the offshore industry, with its political priorities established, just got on and did the business. They gave us a whole lot of tremendous flannel about the 'temporary' nature of these gigantic structures, with their exclusion zones and fearsome penalties for getting too close, suggesting that the sea bed would be restored to its pristine condition in but a few months. Now of course they are suggesting that it is a far more pragmatic solution to merely cut down these huge platforms and topple them as fish farms, as expediency and cost considerations have cut in.

And after due consultation, this is what will probably happen. But it is our attitude to the 'shared' sea which is new, and quite encouraging. Shipping is already compelled to share its sea with fishing and aquaculture, oil and gas, along with 'sustainable' energy users with their wind farms, wave generators and possibly even tidal power stations.

Then there are the dredgers and sandsuckers, reclaimers and those who have splendid ideas of constructing barrages and bridges and tunnels, entire ports and artificial islands. Just a few days ago there was a terrible panic in the Pentland Firth after a fishing boat lost a net "the size of six football pitches" which doubtless would do all sorts of harm to any hapless ship caught up in it, let alone the fish. And there are plans which have advanced beyond the fanciful, of huge mobile fish farms that will be towed around the oceans by tugs as the fish within them grow to a marketable size, and predators are kept at bay.

Whatever we thought of European Commissioner Joe Borg's ideas for an all-embracing European Maritime Policy, you couldn't fault him on the need to consider, and somehow balance, these often competing requirements. Putting it all into practice may require rather more muscle and determination, and will probably make Brussels even more enemies than it has today.

But suppose we could have an industry body that might do the balancing of these various interests. Something not too bureaucratic, which would reconcile rather than prescribe, something industry based rather than government driven.

A couple of weeks ago I met Paul Holthus, executive director of **the World Ocean Council**,

an organisation just a couple of months old but which could provide just the sort of co-operative inter-industry vehicle we need as the complexities of the land spread oceanwards.

Every agency requires a mission these days and that of the World Ocean Council, I see from the back of Holthus' card, suggests that the WOC is "working with business to catalyse leadership and collaboration on sustainability and stewardship of the global marine environment". Which seems to be moderate and sustainable and is not intent on banning everything like other bodies where the word "environment" is bandied about.

Holthus talks enthusiastically of a "coalition of business", which is probably easier to imagine than that of nation states, bearing in mind the progress of treaties like that, for instance, dealing with the law of the sea. The various industrial elements — shipping, oil and gas, fishing etc — all have their own international representative bodies, so what the WOC does is merely to provide a vehicle where they can meet and resolve areas where there are difficulties or where their interests might clash.

The sheer increase in ocean use, says Holthus, demonstrates this need for interaction and scarcely a day goes by without some evidence of a possible conflict of interest. There is oceanic overfishing depleting important fish stocks. There is a sort of sub-sea territorialism taking place as various capable nations try to extend their jurisdiction far beyond their exclusive economic zones. "Sovereignty follows capability" is a useful rule of thumb these days, and the potential of deep water energy exploitation has encouraged a flowering of the technology that will facilitate these developments. Just look at the competing claims on the Arctic between the US, Canada, Russia and others with the capability.

Fishermen routinely do things that terrify shipping. Sometimes it is festooning the seas with vast drift nets that get wrapped around propellers. I only woke up to the fact that tuna were kept alive in huge cages parked in the middle of the Mediterranean when there was that awful story of refugees being discovered by a passing ship hanging onto them.

We are just beginning to get to grips with the requirements of the sustainable energy sector, which will, like oil and gas did all those years ago, enjoy a lot of political favour. But regardless of whether you regard a wind turbine, as does Sir David Attenborough, as an object of beauty, or as most seafarers do, as a navigational obstruction, they are not going to go away in a hurry. Similarly, it is probably sooner rather than later that we will hear of the first accident involving a ship or fishing craft and a wave generator, so systems that promote inter-industry co-operation must surely be welcomed.

At present, each industry is an island. Get them together, says Holthus, and there are “most interesting dynamics” which start to emerge. If industries can engage, out beyond the areas of national jurisdiction, he suggests, they can work together and avoid adversarial competition by determining level playing fields, which are as important in the oceans as they are on land.

It is also important as we consider conservation of the earth’s resources, and observe the way in which responsible companies consider issues of corporate social responsibility. Everybody these days is increasingly operating under the nose of a critical public. When you have (and I have personal experience of this) six-year-old girls lecturing their parents and grandparents about the environment, we just have to knuckle down and be more “responsible”.

Holthus, who lives in Hawaii, describes his present mission being “in outreach mode”, but has already had a good deal of encouragement from many of the bigger fish in the industry pool. A number of core companies and trade bodies have been very supportive, suggesting that they already recognise that there are advantages in interaction.

Will the WOC be just another three letters in the alphabet soup of well-meaning organisations which keeps the collective brains of these industries active? We hope not. But **if we are thinking globally, oceanically and collectively, rather than considering our own narrow industry requirements, the World Ocean Council could be a very good idea.**