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A fair deal on the open sea

HOW EASY it is to be fatalistic about the dangers of harvesting the sea. Two fishing tragedies in three weeks seem to underline the point: what can we do about so risky an occupation? Seagoing communities endure the news with dignified grief. Those who live in safety on the land are tempted just to sigh with relief that it wasn't us.

Such reactions must be resisted. If the sinkings of the trawlers *Antares* and *Premier* have achieved anything, it is to concentrate the public's mind on the dangers the fishermen face. Each tragedy must bear a lesson.

In the case of the *Antares*, dragged under when a nuclear submarine snagged its nets, the lesson is screamingly clear and has at last been acknowledged by the Navy. The new rules which come into force in the Clyde tomorrow, whereby the Navy will notify fishermen of all Nato submarine movements, are overdue. From the Navy's point of view, the easing of tension with the Soviet Union has made the rules acceptable. It should not have taken a sinking to bring them in.

We should not await a second sinking before considering whether the new rules could be extended. The Clyde is not the only place where fishermen face a threat from submarine movements: MPs have called for the rules to be applied to other coastal areas. It is hard to see that this would do grave damage to national security.

A further demand from Northern Irish fishermen, for submarines not to submerge in areas of extensive fishing, may be more problematic, leaving submarine movements open to satellite surveillance and vulnerable to rough seas. But in the current East-West climate a temporary agreement could be reached until international tension rose again. At least, such options should now be openly discussed.

The lessons of the sinking of the *Premier* are less clear. Much has been said about the financial pressures on fishermen, particularly as Christmas approaches, but no one really knows why the trawler was caught in impossible seas while other boats made it to comparative safety. It was probably just bad luck, and she has taken to the seabed any clues as to what overwhelmed her.

We should, however, look forward. This Wednesday brings a crucial meeting of EC fisheries ministers on ways to conserve stocks at which the European Commission will put forward, among other ideas, a proposal to force boats to tie up for 10 days a month. Even as an economic measure this is a half-baked notion which fails to tackle the problem of overcapacity; it is a bureaucratic, not a market, solution which will condemn the fishermen to state-decreed penury. In the light of the *Premier* disaster its safety implications are terrifying: it will force boats to sea in rough conditions. The government must drop its support for this idea and fight it tooth and nail.

It is time at last to consider a decommissioning scheme — not on its own, but as a package of measures which could include changes in net mesh sizes and tighter quotas. The government claims it would not work, but every EC country except Ireland has such a scheme. It is supported by the skippers, a wide variety of politicians, and by the government-appointed Seafish Industry Authority which believes it would cost Britain as little as £30m. Even on the government's own side, Alick Buchanan-Smith has pleaded with ministers to keep an open mind. Those who brave the cruel seas are not looking for charity, but it is time they had a fair deal.