

Lake Hjälmaren Pikeperch Fish Trap; Pikeperch Gill Net



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SPECIES Pikeperch
(*Sander lucioperca*)

FISHING METHOD Fish trap, gill net

COUNTRY Sweden

LOCATION



Lake Hjälmaren, in the south, about 160km west of Stockholm

FISHERY TONNAGE 166 tonnes

THESE DAYS, LAKE Hjälmaren is as fecund and teeming beneath the water as it is above, where ospreys, sea eagles and cormorants soar – but it hasn't always been so. In the early 20th century, the crayfish traditionally targeted by fishermen were wiped out by a plague, so attention was switched to the pikeperch, a predatory freshwater fish with lean, juicy and tender white flesh that can weigh up to 11kg in Sweden. By the late 20th century, it too was in serious decline and desperate management measures were introduced to save it.

Environmental measures

Under the 1994 Fisheries Act in Sweden, all fishermen were required to be licensed – but the detail of fisheries regulation could be agreed locally. On Lake Hjälmaren, the minimum legal size of pikeperch was increased voluntarily to 45cm (compared to 40cm elsewhere) and the mesh size of gill nets to 60cm, meaning even larger fish could escape and mature for longer.

“The bigger a female fish grows, the more eggs she will produce,” says Inger Näslund, a Marine Fisheries Conservation Officer at WWF Sweden who was instrumental in the fishery's MSC certification. “The fishermen wanted a healthy fish stock, because that is the key to a healthy lake. They also limit licences to 25 boats, about 6m long – and they will be limited to no more than 25.”

As a result, stock has increased rapidly and is robustly healthy. In summer, the fishermen use highly selective fish traps – submerged, then hauled up into boats to be emptied quickly of unwanted species or under size fish. Raised from a depth of only 5m, fish suffer minimal expansion of their swim bladder. (Rapid expansion can cause buoyancy problems which make discarded fish prey for gulls.) Survival rates are excellent. In one study, 28 of 2,299 pikeperch tagged were found to have been caught and released at least 10 times.

Gill nets are used mainly in winter, when fishermen drive on to the frozen lake in

snow scooters, cut holes in the ice and use a device called an *is häst* ('ice horse') to carry a line between them under the surface. This is then used to set the net under the ice and haul it manually. Due to the ice cover, it does not trap cormorants or other diving birds as it may occasionally do in summer.

“The fishermen knew they already had a sustainable fishery,” Näslund says, “but they wanted to see if their fish could be labelled. In 2004, I came with my WWF colleague Lennart Nyman, to give a presentation about certification and what the MSC label can do in the marketplace. We thought we would have to leave the room while they thought about it, but the chair just stood up and said, ‘How about it guys? Shall we go for MSC?’ Everyone said yes. We were stunned.”

Increased prices and environmental awareness

Now, 80 per cent of their pikeperch goes to Hjälmarfisk in Gothenburg, a supplier with MSC chain of custody who sells it on, mainly to Germany. “The fishermen get a slightly higher price per kilo if they are certified,” Näslund confirms, but MSC certification has brought subtler, longer-lasting benefits.

“Now, they want to increase the mesh size further so they can have secure stock reproduction,” Näslund says. Their minds were focused, she thinks, by the MSC assessment which made it a condition of certification that fishermen develop an action plan to cope with reduced stock levels in the future. They were also required to collect data on the sex ratio, size and age of pikeperch to spot any shifts in population that might affect their reproductive capacity.

“The fishermen were already on the track of thinking sustainably,” Näslund says, “but the MSC awakened them further. Recently we heard that, on other lakes, the minimum size for pikeperch has also been increased.” Clearly, the message about sustainability is spreading beyond Lake Hjälmaren's shores.



“As one of the largest suppliers of freshwater fish from Scandinavian lakes, we are proud to offer our customers, both at home and abroad, MSC labelled pikeperch from Lake Hjälmaren. We feel a growing interest on the market for MSC product guaranteed to be from a sustainable fishery and we are delighted to be able to meet demand”

Sören Jensen, Managing Director, Hjälmarfisk AB, Göteborg



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