

Loch Torridon Nephrops Creel



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recertified July 2008

SPECIES Langoustine, or
Norway lobster
(*Nephrops norvegicus*)

FISHING METHOD Baited creels, pots
on lines

COUNTRY United Kingdom

LOCATION



Loch Torridon and the
Inner Sound of Raasay,
Northwest Scotland

FISHERY TONNAGE 120 tonnes

“NO, IT’S NOT quite as romantic as going out in a rowing boat and hauling up pots!” exclaims Karen Starr of the Torridon Nephrops Management Group, when I tell her how I imagine the nephrops fishery. “We’ve ten vessels, including four modern catamarans and two single hulls, all under 10m long. Creels [or baited pots, similar to lobster pots, which crustaceans can enter but not leave easily] are laid in strings of 115 at a time, with a buoy marking one end.”

Up until 1983, there was a three-mile limit restricting the use of mobile fishing gear – in other words, trawlers – in these coastal waters where soft corals, sea ferns and sea pens thrive. In 1984, the restriction was lifted, and the creel fishermen found their pots being snagged and towed by trawlers, with “considerable economic loss”. They believed their benign fishing methods were being undermined by other, more industrial ways of harvesting.

In 2001, the Scottish Executive created a “closed area”, a protected zone where only static gear such as creels could be used. The fishermen saw this as a chance to prove they could manage their fishery sustainably, opting for MSC certification as an objective, scientific way of demonstrating it to others.

Voluntary restrictions on fishing

One condition of certification was the formation of a management group to oversee voluntary restrictions on fishing: permitting it only on a fixed number of days per year; using a limited number of pots; putting “berried” females (in other words, those carrying eggs) back into the water; and fitting escape panels to creels so that undersize langoustines would not be caught.

Scientific interest and confirmation

Once certified, the fishery became a kind of living laboratory, with studies conducted by Scottish Natural Heritage, the University of Glasgow, and Fisheries and Research Services in Aberdeen, among others. “They showed we had very benign impacts on the

environment,” Starr explains, “with extremely low bycatch and insignificant effects from ‘ghost fishing’, where a gear type is lost at sea but continues to catch fish on the seabed.”

Political influence

The fishery’s only concern was that creel vessels which did not belong to the group, or follow its code of practice, were showing up in the area – drawn, ironically, by the publicity surrounding closure, which made this an attractive place to fish. In 2008, when the fishery was reassessed, the certifier, Moody Marine, voiced similar concerns. It imposed a condition obliging the fishery to make sure the limits in place were effective. In response, the fishery approached the Scottish Government to find ways of addressing the problem.

“That is where we stand now,” Starr explains, acknowledging that any intervention by government will come as a direct result of MSC engagement. Initially, though, the scheme was a way of preserving the status quo, she says: “The certification was in order to retain the closed zone; it helps us keep the situation the same. We joined the programme to prove and maintain our sustainability, to keep it economical for us and to look after our community.”

Socio-economic benefits

On the economic side, Loch Torridon live nephrops fetches between three and four times the price of the same creature netted by trawler, Starr explains. Since 95 per cent of the catch goes to Spain, where interest in the MSC certification is only just beginning to catch on, it does not carry the MSC label.

On the community side, the benefits have been incalculable. Since certification, the number of fishers in the group has remained static or slightly increased – a tangible social benefit, since creeling is seen as an attractive lifestyle. “That is what we wanted,” says Starr, “to make sure this fishery was passed on to the sons of the guys who are fishing now. We take a long view.”

“ The fishermen in the Torridon nephrops fishery are among the most responsible and forward-thinking it has been our pleasure to work with. It is greatly to their credit that they sought and obtained the first MSC accreditation in Scotland, providing a robust and independent confirmation that their management approach is valid and worthwhile ”

Dr David Donnan, policy and advice manager, Scottish Natural Heritage



“ We can say to the Scottish Government and other stakeholders, ‘Look, we are running a sustainable fishery’. That is the benefit of being MSC ”

Karen Starr, Secretary, Torridon Nephrops Management Group