

# South-west Handline Mackerel



© John Spaul



DATE CERTIFIED 29 August 2001;  
recertified February 2007

SPECIES Mackerel  
(*Scomber scombrus*)

FISHING METHOD Handline

COUNTRY United Kingdom



The coastal waters of Cornwall and Devon, between Start Point and Hartland Point, in south-west England

FISHERY TONNAGE 1,750 tonnes

“YOU DON’T NEED bait,” Nathan de Rozarieux tells me, unwinding his line from a hand-held wooden board, like an artist’s palette, and lowering it into the water. Tied to it are a lead weight and 35 hooks 5cm long, festooned with red feathers and plastic. “That’s how it feels when the mackerel bite,” he says, handing me the line and nudging his boat slowly forward. All I can detect is a faint trembling from the dark waters below. “They’re feeding on plankton, or chasing sand eels,” de Rozarieux says. When he winds in the line, there are eight fish – not one – dancing in the sunlight.

### Traditional, low-impact fishing

This low-impact method is precise and clinical, targeting only one species (others are thrown back still alive) and allowing juveniles to be returned to the water. “Fishing the way we do, it is impossible to overfish or damage the stock,” says David Muirhead, Secretary of the South West Handline Fishermen’s Association (SWHFA). Besides, the 150-strong fleet is subject to a quota of just 1,750 tonnes a year, less than one per cent of the UK total. “The trawl fishery, the big Scotch boats, catch half of that in a night,” says Muirhead.

### Raising the profile

This fishery with a small environmental impact carries huge marketing clout. “At some stage in the year, all the big UK multiple retailers list MSC handline mackerel from Cornwall,” de Rozarieux says – and since certification in 2001, hardly a month has gone by without it being mentioned in the press.

“Being MSC has undoubtedly raised the profile of the fishery,” he says. “A lot of journalists pick it up – and in anything mentioning the MSC, handline mackerel is cited as something from the UK. Magazine supplements often use it in their recipes. For them, the fact that we are MSC is... well... the hook.”

### Price premiums

As consumer awareness has increased, so have prices. “Large mackerel fetch a heck of a lot more than any other grade,” says Muirhead. “We have been getting up to £4 a kilo, which is unbelievable. That equates to £28 a stone. In the 1970s, we were getting 80p a stone – and even recently, if someone was getting £7 a stone for large mackerel, that was remarkable. One reason for that must be MSC status, but it’s hard to put a figure on it.”

De Rozarieux thinks the other reason might be the trend towards healthy eating, and the well-publicised benefits of the omega-3 fatty acids found in oily fish – but for him, arguing about the price of fish isn’t the point.

### Protecting existing markets

“For us, what the MSC is all about is protecting the market we have got,” he says. “Most of the multiples [supermarket chains] are using MSC certification in their sourcing decision tree now, so you have to have it to get your product on the shelves. MSC is seen as the gold standard in eco-labelling. The message is that, if you want to deal with the multiples in the future, you will have to be MSC.” All of the UK’s major retailers have put MSC certification at the centre of their sustainable seafood sourcing strategies.

Cornwall is well served with merchants operating an MSC chain of custody, meaning all mackerel sold in supermarkets carries the blue logo. “There are a handful of them down here,” de Rozarieux says, “buying for Tesco, Marks & Spencer, Sainsbury’s and Morrisons.” At Newlyn, where the fish is auctioned, a buyer for Migros, the Swiss retailer, also puts in an appearance. “They pay top dollar for quality,” de Rozarieux says, “and they too are demanding MSC.”



“ One man in a small open boat, using a simple line with hooks, is fishing at its purest. The MSC logo tells us this fish has been caught in the most environmentally friendly way possible – and, while mackerel comes from many places, the Cornish handline fish is something special ”

Andrew Mallison, Marine Technologist, Marks & Spencer