

# Thames Blackwater Herring Drift-net



DATE CERTIFIED 3 March 2000; recertified December 2005

SPECIES Herring  
(*Clupea harengus*)

FISHING METHOD Drift net

COUNTRY United Kingdom

LOCATION



The Greater Thames Estuary, extending out to the six-mile limit

FISHERY TONNAGE 2 tonnes  
(landed 2006/07)

NOWHERE IS THE phrase ‘Small is beautiful’ more apt than in this tiny fishery stretching north from the mouth of the River Thames to the Blackwater and Colne estuaries near Colchester, a town just 56 miles from London, in the eastern county of Essex. Within this restricted area (part of the larger Thames herring fishery), only drift nets are allowed – set by fewer than half a dozen boats, all less than 10m long, that fish for only an hour or two each day.

To complete the theme, the fish they are targeting are unusually small as well. The herring that spawn here, known as Blackwater stock or Thames Estuary herring, are a discrete population with one less vertebra than North Sea herring. “As a result, they are smaller,” says Joss Wiggins, Chief Fishery Officer of the Kent and Essex Sea Fisheries Committee (KESFC), which manages, regulates and develops fisheries in the region, “so we needed some kind of marketing tool to encourage people to buy our product.”

### Gaining fisher’s support

In the late 1990s, before sustainability was a household word, the fishermen saw MSC certification as the solution. Selling locally-caught fish to local markets in a sustainable manner “ticked a lot of boxes for them”, Wiggins says, but there were benefits for him as a fisheries manager. “It was useful to have someone else come in and audit what we were doing. If you are a regulator, it helps when others back up what you are trying to do to manage stock sustainably. It makes the fishermen more supportive of your measures.”

### Changing regulatory framework

One such measure was the annual closure of spawning areas (in February for the drift-net area, in March for the whole Thames herring fishery) under an existing byelaw. “It was set by date,” Wiggins explains, “but there was no mechanism for closing the whole estuary in the event of quota being reached early.” For a month, trawlers

outside the restricted drift-net zone could continue to fish and potentially exceed the TAC (Total Allowable Catch).

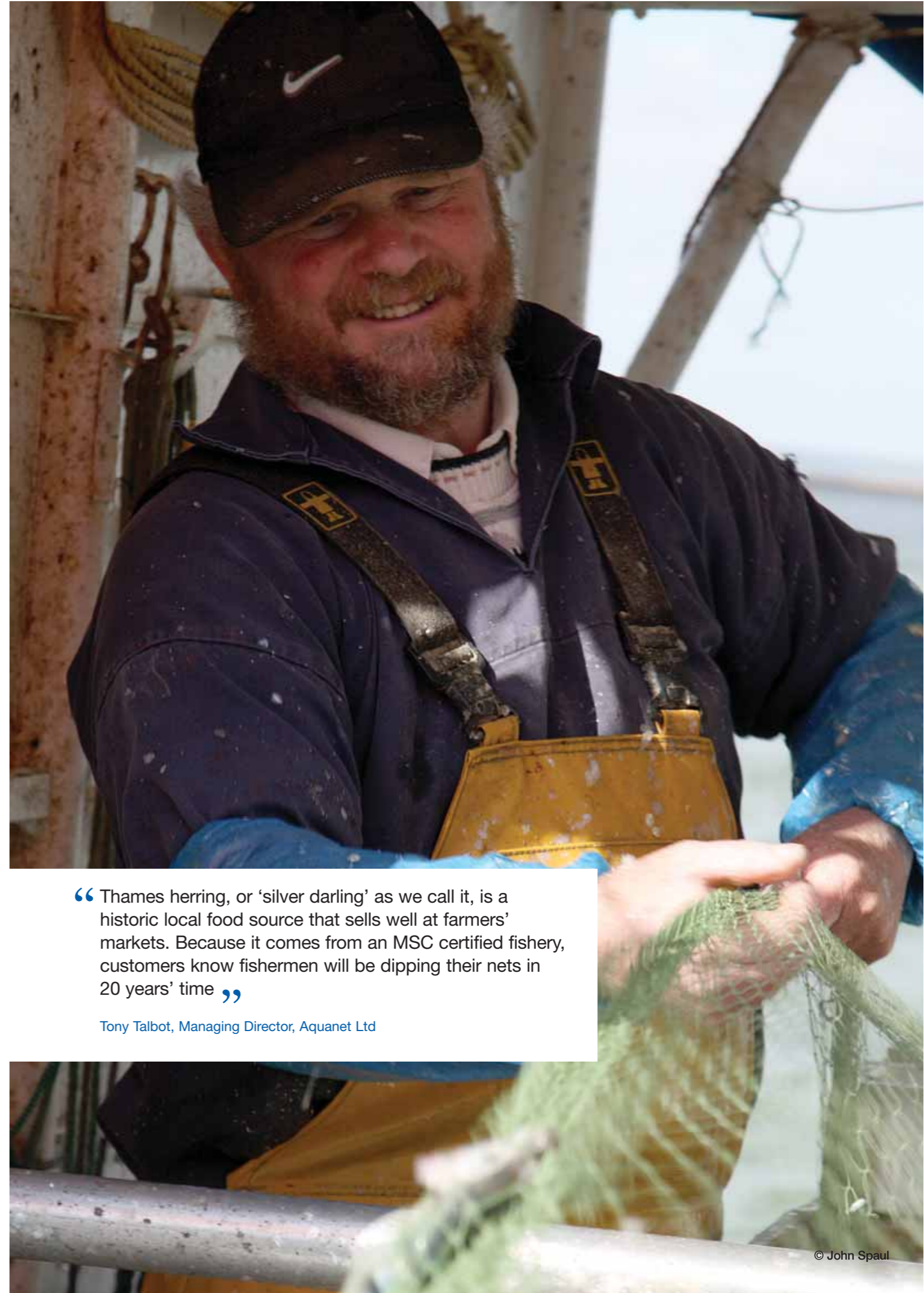
One condition of achieving full MSC certification was that this problem be addressed. “We changed our byelaws,” Wiggins explains, “so we can now close the whole estuary when Defra (the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs) tells us the quota inside the MSC area has been reached. That triggers closure of the whole fishery – which helps protect future stock.”

### Economic benefits

However, the economic gains were instant and spectacular. “Even before certification was granted,” said fisherman Andrew French at the time, “a buyer from Grimsby wanted to buy it all – and the price went up from £2 to £3 per stone immediately.” In 2000, the year of MSC certification, prices peaked at £388 a tonne, according to Defra. Trials were conducted with Thames herring in UK supermarkets; and for a while Duchy Originals, a UK brand founded by HRH The Prince of Wales, sold MSC Thames herring pâté. The main outlets, though, were local farmers’ markets and shops, as is the case today.

Then, ironically, the Blackwater stock decided to go elsewhere to spawn. “They seem to be congregating further up the Thames Estuary,” Wiggins says, meaning trawlers outside the MSC area “are getting improving catches of 80 to 90 tonnes a year while we are landing virtually no herring.”

It is galling, but there is a silver lining. Having observed the flurry of interest at the time of certification, local fishermen are now talking about seeking certification for “some of the major species that the fishing community here is catching.” These include Dover sole, bass and thornback ray. “The herring has acted as a catalyst,” says Wiggins, “and if the same thing is applied to some of these other stocks, most fishermen round here think it could work.”



“ Thames herring, or ‘silver darling’ as we call it, is a historic local food source that sells well at farmers’ markets. Because it comes from an MSC certified fishery, customers know fishermen will be dipping their nets in 20 years’ time ”

Tony Talbot, Managing Director, Aquanet Ltd

“ What MSC certification does is get the fishermen’s minds engaged and fully supportive of our measures to try and manage the stock more sustainably – especially if they can see some benefit in terms of value ”

Joss Wiggins, Chief fishery Officer, Kent & Essex Sea Fisheries Committee