

Astrid Fiske North Sea Herring



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SPECIES North Sea herring
(*Clupea harengus*)

FISHING METHOD Pelagic purse seine

COUNTRY Sweden

LOCATION



The north and central North Sea, from the south-west coast of Norway across to the Shetland Islands and the north-east coast of Scotland

FISHERY TONNAGE 5,000 tonnes

NATURALLY FERMENTED, CURED and eaten raw, *maatjes* herring – the type landed by this fishery – is regarded as a delicacy in the Netherlands, Belgium and Germany. “It is fat herring without the milk or roe,” says Werner Larsson, Manager of Astrid Fiskexport, the Swedish fishing company that targets the herring just as the females’ ovaries are ripening. “They are spring-spawning, so we fish in a small part of the year – from mid-May until July.”

Low-impact fishing

Purse seine nets are ‘set’ around a shoal, then drawn in gradually like the strings of a purse. Fishing the mid-water column only, they have little or no contact with the seabed, avoiding damage to it – and the fish in the net continue to swim as the ‘purse’ is closed. Gear type was one reason why the MSC certifiers were satisfied that this was a low-impact fishery.

Oddly, the *maatjes* herring’s own habits help make the fishery sustainable too. They tend to be found in ‘clean’ shoals comprising only pre-spawning virgin herring of exactly the type required, with very few mackerel netted by mistake. Bycatch runs at less than two per cent, and no discarding occurs. Using their vast experience, plus sonar and electronic fish-finding equipment, the skippers of the Astrid Fiske fleet (three modern vessels ranging from 36m to 45m long) target only shoals of the correct species, density and size.

As well as being fat, the fish must have fed on small shrimp – the ‘red feed’ spewed out when a *maatjes* herring’s belly is pressed. “Even when we were going through MSC assessment, we were registering all slippages,” Larsson says – meaning the release of fish from the net after sampling has shown them to be too small or not to the *maatjes* specification. “We now carry out audits and, since certification, there has not been one occasion when we have slipped fish.” However, since the

practice is common in North Sea herring fisheries, among the conditions of certification were that Astrid Fiske should co-operate fully with any future research into slippage survival rates, and actively seek discussions with the Swedish Fisheries Board about taking scientific observers on trips. “I know the skippers will welcome an independent observer at any time,” says Larsson.

“The actions required were small,” he adds, “but now we can prove we are acting sustainably and responsibly, for our children and for our children’s children.”

New markets

As the first *maatjes* herring fishery to be MSC certified, Astrid Fiske has had a bumper year. “For us, it has opened up new markets,” Larsson confirms. “We are doing business with a couple of new wholesalers whose customers are demanding MSC products. We sold more fish last year because of that.”

The pressure, he says, is coming from supermarkets – especially in the Netherlands – many of which have pledged to buy all their fish from MSC sources by 2011. “It is a question of being allowed to sell to them, or not being allowed to sell,” Larsson says. “There is no choice. Now, all the other fisheries are following us. In a couple of years, being MSC-certified will not even be discussed. It will just be something natural, which all fisheries must have.”

“ We are very pleased to be able to offer MSC *maatjes* to our customers as the result of a classic example of co-operation between NGOs, the MSC and all suppliers in the supply chain. It is major step in our effort to make our assortment of fishery products more sustainable ”

Caspar Woolthuis, Sustainability Manager, Super de Boer supermarkets, NL



“ We told our skippers, ‘If you don’t do this, if you don’t act responsibly and go for MSC certification, you won’t sell any fish in the future.’ All the supermarkets are saying they will only buy MSC fish. You have to look beyond your own nose tip, you have to look ahead many years ”

Werner Larsson, Manager, Astrid Fiskexport, Sweden