

Burry Inlet Cockles



Photo provided courtesy of South Wales Sea Fisheries Committee



DATE CERTIFIED 20 April 2001;
recertified February 2007

SPECIES Cockle
(*Cerastoderma edule*)

FISHING METHOD Hand-raking and sieving

COUNTRY United Kingdom

LOCATION



The Burry Inlet estuary, near Llanelli and Swansea in South Wales, in the western part of the United Kingdom

FISHERY TONNAGE 960 tonnes (2008)

EVEN BEFORE MSC certification, the cockles of the Burry Inlet had time and tradition on their side. Throughout the history of the fishery (which has existed since Roman times), the only method of capture allowed has been hand-raking and sieving – digging the shellfish from the mud at low tide, then passing them through a mesh so under-size juveniles can escape, rebury and breed. Gatherers, traditionally women, harvested 100-150kg a day – as much as they could carry – until the arrival of horse-drawn carts in the 1920s increased the load and, for the first time, put pressure on the cockle stocks.

Control measures ahead of their time

In 1965, the Burry Inlet Cockle Order was established to control the quantity of shellfish taken. Licences were (and still are) issued to just 50 or so gatherers, the aim being to take an agreed portion of the biomass each year, based on surveys carried out in May and November by fishery personnel and CEFAS (the Centre for Environment, Fisheries and Aquaculture Science), which has three laboratories in the UK. These involve the random counting and size classification of cockles, along transects on both sides of the Loughor Estuary. The remainder are left as broodstock, and to provide food for the oystercatchers and other birds that flock to the area, designated a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) and EU Special Protection Area (SPA).

The Order proved to be legislation ahead of its time. “The EU’s Common Fisheries Policy works by determining input controls – the size of the fleet, the fishing effort – and output controls, meaning how much fish is taken by quota,” explains Phil Coates, Director of the South Wales Sea Fisheries Committee (SWSFC), one of 12 such committees in Britain that regulate and manage fisheries in their area. “We have exactly the same controls at Burry Inlet – and every kind of control in-between. However, regulation across the drying sands is somewhat easier than controlling fishing vessels at sea! We can tell people not to fish on Sundays, to fish this area and not that area, to encourage

the picking of big cockles or small cockles. We also have an additional penal system in force: if you break our rules, it’s three strikes and you’re out.”

Staying in the vanguard with MSC

Despite these measures, Coates was determined to go down the MSC route. “We had a well-managed fishery,” he says, “and if we had that, why not flaunt it? We felt other fisheries could be managed with a similar level of control and regulator-industry involvement. We wanted to be in the vanguard. It sounds altruistic, but that is our job – managing shellfish, not just for consumers, but for fishermen to catch and for birds to live on.”

Government support

Eight years later, 39 fisheries worldwide are certified by the MSC, meaning Burry Inlet (only the fifth to receive the accolade, and the first for bivalve molluscs) was indeed in the vanguard of a movement. Recognising its success, the Welsh Assembly Government has provided a ringing endorsement in both its Environment Strategy for Wales and its developing Welsh Fisheries Strategy.

“It is saying we need to have more MSC-certified fisheries as a measure of sustainable fisheries management,” Coates says. “MSC certification is an independent measure of success, a benchmark.” Such is the Government’s commitment; the Countryside Council for Wales (CCW) and WWF have twice shared the costs of certifying the Burry Inlet MSC fishery.

Local merchants, too, are aware of the benefits. “Everyone is using this as a model for moving forward with Regulating Orders,” says Colin MacDonald, MD of Leslie A Parsons & Sons and Chairman of Penclawdd Shellfish Processing Ltd. “I’d like to see the River Dee seeking MSC status.” He wants Burry Inlet to remain MSC certified – despite being temporarily closed due to an increase in cockle mortality that has nothing to do with the way it is managed. “Supermarkets are increasingly keen on MSC product,” he says, “and we don’t want to lose our link into the supply chain. When the cockles come back, we are ready.”



“ MSC certification recognises a well managed fishery. I’ve seen so many investments lost because there have been no proper controls or management. We need continuity of supply and we need sustainability ”

Colin MacDonald, Chairman, Penclawdd Shellfish Processing Ltd

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