



## History of Fishing

Hunters and fishermen have roamed the Kvarken area since the Stone Age. There have been permanent settlements in the Kvarken archipelago since the Middle Ages, but for example year-round settlements did not come to Mickelsörarna until the 19th century.

The oldest written reference to Kvarken dates back to the 14th century. Fishing and seal hunting were the main sources of livelihood from the Middle Ages up in the late 19th century. The first peak season for the Baltic Sea fish as merchandise occurred in the time of the Hanseatic League, i.e. the mid-14th century. Continuing until the 17th century, the peak season was started off by salt and a well-organised salt trade.

In Ostrobothnia, fishing has been characterised by mobility and wide contact networks, thanks to bartering and export. Peasants used to take salted and dried fish to Stockholm by boat or small sailing vessels (3–8 men), especially in the autumn.

King Gustav Vasa was trying to find new ways of increasing the Crown revenue, and profitable fishing piqued his interest.

It was not possible to tap into the fishing in the archipelago as there was an old regional law that ruled that the owner of the land also owned the water.

Fishing in the outer archipelago increased in the 17th century and the long distances led to the building of fishing huts. The islands in the outer archipelago thus got their summer settlements, evolving into small communities with fishing huts, salting sheds, harbours and small areas of cultivated land. The remains of temporary overnight shelters, net-drying poles and boats remind us of the heyday of fishing in the outer archipelago.

One of the Kvarken specialities was the winter seine fishing that was carried out under the ice; it became more common during the 20th century. The Finnish Swedish-speaking fishermen introduced trawl fishing into Finland in 1956. Almost all villages in the Kvarken area had a fishing harbour. Whitefish and salmon fishing became even more important at the end of the 20th century.

The significance of fishing in terms of the national economy decreased in the last century, so it is important to distinguish

between the national and the regional economy.

## Fishing Rights

A sea area or an archipelago area can be regarded as common fishing waters, or Crown waters, where everyone has had the right to fish since the days of Gustav Vasa. For a certain payment to the Crown, and later to the State, everyone had the right to fish for Baltic herring in these areas. Fishing in the archipelago was largely beyond the control of Gustav Vasa as there was an old regional law that ruled that the owner of the land also owned the water.

The peasants were subject to taxation for the fishing rights. As early as the beginning of the 14th century, coastal residents were granted an exclusive right to fish in specified coastal waters – i.e., waters that extended to the fields and meadows of the shore owners. Land ownership as the basis of and requirement for fishing rights in nearby waters thus goes back a long time in history.

The Ostrobothnian landscape was continually changing due to the land uplift, which made it practically impossible to regulate the ownership of the alluvial land created by the land uplift. This meant that the fish resources were freed and became available to every stratum of society. People who didn't have farms could freely fish in the coastal waters or in waters whose ownership was not regulated.

At least until the 1920s they were allowed to use the common fishing waters of the village without financial compensation. Compared to the Finnish

**Chart. The export activities by Ostrobothnian peasants peaked at the end of the 16th century; the Korsholm parish in particular had a real heyday. Stockfish was dried in the open air, and sometimes contained several species of fish (pike, whitefish, bream and ide). 1 lispound (lp) = 8.5 kg, b= barrels**

Year	1579	1580	1590	1600
Stockfish	1,348 lp	48 lp	104 lp	160 lp
Salted Baltic herring	400 b	64 b	520 b	59 b





Archipelago and the Uusimaa coast, the Ostrobothnian coastal waters were much more freely available for fishing.

In some villages, however, the water areas were divided and regulated. In Björköby, for example, the fishing waters were strictly divided into separate areas for whitefish, Baltic herring, and barrage fishing.

Since time immemorial, the fishing waters had been divided between three village associations named after the first three Björköby residents, Brådd, Skägg and Galt. The associations fished in six fishing areas that were jointly owned. The areas were inherited – i.e., they changed owners in a certain order each year according to an ancient custom. Each turn was divided into two (seine) sections so that the members of each section fished in the same waters every seventh year.

The purpose of the system was to ensure that no one got better catches than the others. In other villages seine fishing was carried out according to the taxation unit, but in Björköby the decisive factor was the size of the seine area.

## Fishing Baltic Herring

When referring to the importance of fishing and fish trade for the islanders, Baltic herring has always had a special status. Baltic herring was such a large part of the staple diet and used so much that it was not even thought of as fish. Baltic herring and fish were differentiated from each other – the so-called mountain fish was the “proper” fish. The mountain fish used to include fish species that were not desirable as human food (e.g. bream, ide and roach), even if they might be enjoying a renaissance today.

Baltic herring was caught with Baltic herring nets and seines, later also with fyke nets. When fishing on common waters (Crown waters), one-seventh of the catch



FYKE NET FISHING FOR BALTIC HERRING. PHOTO: SEPPO LAMMI

had to be given to the Crown. In earlier times, the islanders only used ina, a type of Baltic herring seine, but in the 19th century these were replaced by Baltic herring nets.

Compared to summer and autumn fishing (outer archipelago fishing), spring fishing was insignificant. In the outer archipelago, net fishing was pursued in well-known Baltic herring areas, such as Storskär, Norrskär (Alken), Klobbuden (Klobbskat), Valsörarna, Rikgrund (Ritgrund) and Mickelsörarna. In these areas you could get enough fish in one night to last the whole winter, and even have some to sell. In 1564, when the number of Korsholm parish residents was 3,000, there were 76 peasants with 120 nets and 38 boats fishing in the area. The usual catch at that time was 1–2 barrels of Baltic herring per peasant per year.

One crew consisted of two men and 12–14 nets. During the fishing season, the nets were set every night, weather permitting. The nets were first taken down from drying and equipped with stone weights. Each stage was completed in the right order. The fishermen rowed or

sailed to the known Baltic herring spots a short distance off the shallows. One of the fishermen rowed, the other set the nets. Until 1835, the nets were set in a straight line from the shallows; later, the end of the net was set in a curve or hook-like shape – thus the name “hook net”. Setting the nets as traps was started in the 1880s. For each trap, you needed four nets: two as fences and two as the trap, which was set around the outer ends of the fence nets. The ancient way of fishing with straight nets continued until the 20th century.

As the nets had to be lifted and dried after each fishing trip, people started to make drying poles to hang the nets on. Baltic herring net fishing continued until the 20th century. During the first few decades, the Ostrobothnian coast had several regularly visited fishing spots with well-kept residential buildings and storerooms.

Along with the net, the Baltic herring fyke became important fishing equipment that made it possible to practice rational large-scale fishing, both in the inner and outer archipelago.





The fyke net was set as soon as the ice broke up in the spring and was left in the water until the end of July.

The biggest problem related to fyke fishing was to find a suitable place. A place that had yielded good catches year after year could suddenly dry up. Due to changing ice conditions, the length of the fishing season varied from year to year.

## Seine Fishing

Seine fishing has been practised in this region for a long time. The seine fishing methods can be divided into winter or ice seine, land seine and pull seine.

The seine net was expensive fishing equipment that took a long time to make, and it was traditionally owned jointly by several, often 6–12, farms. The farms shared the responsibility for making and maintaining the net, and they also had to provide the workforce needed for setting it.

The catch was divided between the owners. The large winter seine nets that were introduced towards the end of the 19th century changed the system. The catches were sold in the cities, and instead of payment in kind, the owners started to get money for their work. The preferred catch included Baltic herring and smelt that swam in thick shoals out in the open waters.

## Winter Fishing

Wintertime fishing methods included nets, hooks and fyke nets. Fishing was mainly pursued by people who didn't have farms as they had no other livelihood in the winter. Even those who

owned land were fishing with herring nets in the open sea and shoals.

The "rumnät" net was used for catching burbot and whitefish. It was set in a suitable spot near underwater shallows or between two shallows.

The bottom had to have vegetation, otherwise the net's weight got stuck between the rocks on the bottom, making it difficult to get the net back up. It was therefore very important to sound the fishing area first. The fishermen also had to take note of the sea level as the net could freeze and get stuck in the ice during low tides.

## Barrage Fishing and Fishing in Brooks and Rivers

For centuries, fishing in small lakes, brooks and rivers had a significant role, especially in springtime when the fish swam upstream to spawn. It was common to use wooden fish traps made of slats, without any yarn. The trap was built by pressing wooden slats, sticks or rods into a thick nest at the bottom of the lake. The mouth leading to the heart-shaped part was narrow and could be closed. When the fish had swum in, they were lifted out with a hand net. This method was only possible in shallow water.

The barrage was a kind of dam or a bridge built over the water, with a hole in the middle to direct the fish in. The fish were caught using small fyke nets, so-called lana, and stream fyke nets. In the spring, when the fish started to head upstream with the freshwater reaching the mouth of the brook or river,

the tackle had to be got into the water within hours; the best season only lasted for a few days. First came the pike, then the perch and then the ide.

The barrage was built from timber, poles, twigs, stakes, fir twigs and tree-top branches. Walls were built on both sides of a brook or inlet, and the tackle was fastened to the hole left in the middle. The walls created a barrage that was held in place by stones and poles driven into the ground. The block was so tight that the fish could not find their way through it.

Two firm tree trunks, planks or poles were laid across the stream to create a bridge for the fisherman to stand on while setting the fyke or emptying it. The largest barrages were located in inlets and were built on stone bridges.

The lana was a smaller fyke net made of thick hemp yarn that was stretched on a wooden frame with a dozen supporting sticks. The thicker ends of the supporting sticks were attached to the rectangular frame. The sticks were bent so that their tips met at the back, creating a cone. The four smaller sticks kept the yarn tight at the mouth of the trap. The lana was available in different sizes, but usually it was about 130 cm long, 45 cm wide and 55 cm high.

