

The Helford River bait digging

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Bait Digging

If you are planning on going fishing soon, you will need some bait. And, especially if you're thinking of trying for some flatfish, a nice fat lugworm should do the trick though never forget that lures and spinners are good alternatives for catching bass.

●●●● Lugworms

The lugworm, *Arenicola marina*, is a soft, segmented, sedentary marine worm which can grow up to 20 cm. in length. It lives in burrows in mud and sandy shores and feeds by filtering its food from the moving tide. It is short-lived, highly productive and is usually a resilient and reliable source of bait, well able to cope with digging pressure. The adults spawn during the winter. The juvenile worms live in nursery

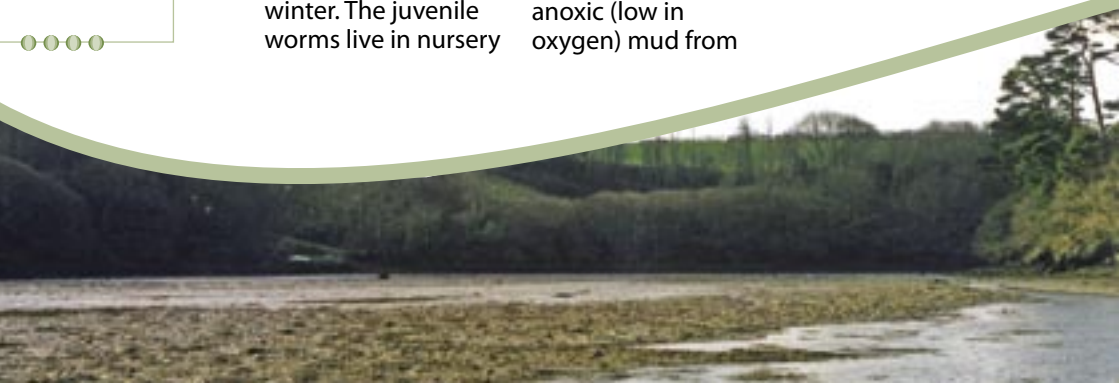
beds on the upper shore; adults live in beds near the low water mark.

In Holland, millions of worms are harvested each year, with no apparent adverse impact. But, in some smaller British estuaries, increased bait-digging has caused problems.

Bait-digging turns the layers of the shore upside down, bringing to the surface the black, anoxic (low in oxygen)

beds below. Lugworm beds usually recover from digging quickly (1-6 months) as the tide redistributes the mounds and basins created. However, the situation varies from place to place and, in some places such as Poole Harbour and Menai Straits, worm populations have found difficulty in recovering.

Backfilling the holes can improve the situation.





The Helford River

On the Helford River, local people have dug a few bait worms for personal use for as long as anyone can remember. In the winter of 1991, the digging suddenly intensified with up to 12 people at a time working at low tide, mostly in Gillan Creek. At the end of the winter, the once quiet creeks had come to resemble a battlefield, with the mounds and basins left behind persisting for months. In addition the narrow local roads had been obstructed by cars parking in the passing places.

No one resents occasional digging, but there is widespread local resentment that commercial diggers were exploiting the resource without paying any regard to either wildlife or the local community. In consequence, a Code of Conduct was agreed with Cornish angling groups and commercial digging actively discouraged in the HVMCA.

●● Ragworms

Ragworms, *Nereis* spp., very active predatory worms on muddy sand, are also used as bait but the highly valued king rag is under severe pressure with only a handful of sites left in Cornwall.

●● Birds

Where birds normally gather studies have shown that due to

disturbance, fewer birds are present during periods of bait-digging than would otherwise be the case. In the year following a ban on bait-digging in the Lindsfarne National Nature Reserve, the numbers of wigeon present rose by 700% and shelduck by more than 100%.



**If you want to dig bait,
please adhere to the
Bait Diggers Code
of Conduct.**

●● Other marine animals

Worms are not the only animals that live within the shore. **It has been estimated that for every gram of lugworm dug by hand, 2 grams of other species are destroyed.** Slow movers like cockles, sand mason worms and sand gapers are most obviously at risk whilst the sudden exposure to ultra-violet light destroys many of the extremely small animals which are a vital part of the marine food chain.

Show that you care for your sport.
Make sure that you are a good
ambassador for fishing by
following this
code.

BAIT DIGGERS CODE OF CONDUCT



- ✓ **Back-fill all diggings.**
This minimises disturbance to the animals left & doesn't interfere with other beach users.
 - ✓ **Avoid digging close to boat moorings or causing disturbance to them.**
This is particularly important Easter to end of October
 - ✓ **Obtain permission before crossing private land but preferably use public rights of way.**
This safeguards access to the worm beds for the future.
 - ✓ **Put rocks back as you found them especially when collecting peeler crabs.**
Do not trap seaweed beneath them.
 - ✓ **Do not dig in the upper shore areas.**
This is the lugworm nursery area.
- Remember:** all Lug leave a cast, other bait worms don't.
Thin casts are made by small worms, thick casts by large ones.
- ✓ **Do not take more worms than you can use or keep.**
This applies to bait purchases, even if you can afford to waste money!
 - ✓ **Leave undersized worms.**
4" for Lug and 6" for King Rag. They are your future supply of bait.
 - ✓ **Do not dig in April & May as King Rag are spawning.**
 - ✓ **Ripe worms are easy to recognise - they are bright green.**
 - ✓ **Observe sensible safety precautions on the muddy shores.**
Avoid digging alone, leave location details & expected return time with responsible adult, carry mobile phone, whistle and rope.

We are doing our best. The rest is up to you.

Sponsors

Thanks are due to the sponsors of this leaflet the Helford Marine Conservation Group Members' Section and also thanks to Derek Goodwin for assistance in preparing the text, photographs by Treve Opie and Paul Naylor www.marinephoto.co.uk.

No bait digging is allowed on the oyster beds, west of Port Navas creek. These are private and there is no right of way on the foreshore below the high water mark.