

# The Helford River fishing

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# Helford River Fishing

Many early human settlements were based around coasts and estuaries where seafood could always be found. The abundance of marine life in the Helford River has long supported surrounding communities and continues to do so.

Every Good Friday, families turn out to go “Trigging”, the hand collection of cockles, thus perpetuating a millennia-old tradition. Meanwhile, the Duchy of Cornwall Oyster Farm carries Helford’s shellfish industry into the twenty first century. A vibrant fishing fleet is also based in the river. The Helford River is in fact one of the few remaining tidal water private fisheries in Britain and is owned by the Duchy of Cornwall

Helford boat

## Outside the HVMCA

Much of Cornwall’s fishing heritage was based upon the herring in cooler years, and pilchards in warmer. The great autumn inshore shoals of pilchard were pressed, salted and barrelled locally either for use later in the year or for export and thousands of tonnes were shipped south to Portugal and Italy. This fishery lasted for over 500 years, before being replaced by the mackerel. Huge catches of either are now rare; but the pilchard or “Cornish Sardine” and hand-line caught mackerel are tasty, healthy, and sustainable foods that are returning to favour and helping maintain local fishing communities.

## The Commercial Fleet

The commercial fishing sector based in the Helford River is highly active with fishing vessels at work during all seasons of the year and through most weathers.

Not only can the Helford boast that its fisherpersons (two are female) are a robust group of hardy professionals, but also that they are following entirely static fishing methods. The Helford fleet lands high quality fish from short trips, using mainly large mesh nets which catch the larger fish with almost no discarded marine life and directly employs upwards of two dozen local persons at sea in

an area where there are few other employment opportunities. Studies have shown that for every fisherman working at sea at least four jobs are created ashore.

The fleet follows a ‘no-waste’ fishing technique of potting, tangle netting, gill netting and hand-lining thought to be relatively sustainable, obviously provided that a limited number of vessels are involved. The effects on the environment are minimised and the absence of towed gears reduces damage to the seabed and allows for a relatively low carbon footprint in terms of engine fuel usage.

Mixed catch

## Conservation

The Helford River is an important area for the younger stages of many fish where they can grow safely in warm, fertile water. Its designation as a Bass Nursery Area highlights its importance for bass. Fishing for bass from boats is banned between May and December inclusive. There is also a ban on using fixed nets there and a 37.5cm Minimum Landing Size (MLS) for bass (2009). Shore fishing with rod and line (subject to Duchy consent) is not banned in the river but may be restricted by access.

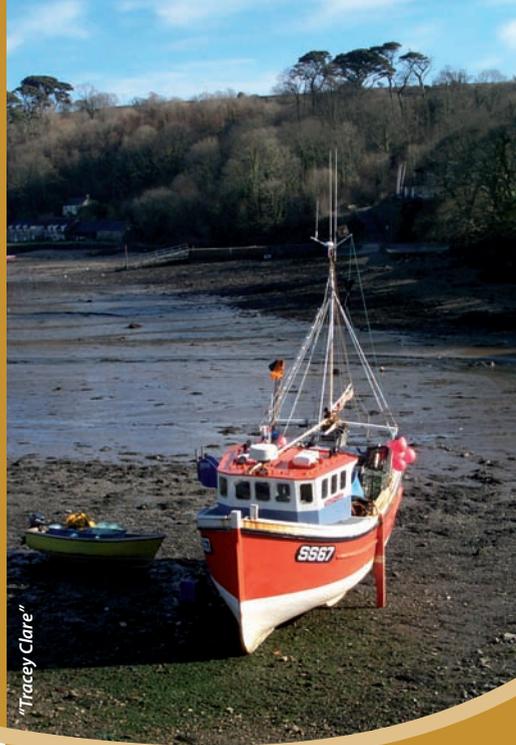
Check restrictions and MLS for various species  
[www.helfordmarineconservation.co.uk](http://www.helfordmarineconservation.co.uk)  
[www.cornwall.gov.uk/sea fisheries](http://www.cornwall.gov.uk/sea fisheries)

Commercial fishing by Helford-based boats is limited within the confines of the estuary which is a private fishery owned by the Duchy of Cornwall. Most fishing takes place in the track of ground that lies within the six-mile limit southwards from Falmouth Bay to the Lizard and with some activity eastward up to Gull Rock.

The six-mile limit marks the line inside which

foreign vessels cannot work, and thus provides a degree of sanctuary for fixed gear operators from the continental trawlers and large scallop-dredging vessels.

The structure of the fleet has not changed significantly over the last decade although necessary upgrading and modernisation has taken place.



Tracey Clare

## Recreational angling

The Helford river complex can provide a safe and productive sea angling venue for young and old alike although it is but a pale shadow of its former self. Many species of fish can still be caught but they are usually small in size and numbers.

The usual methods of ledgering, feathering, spinning and float fishing can be employed.

The baits used may be sandeel (except when fishing from a boat between May and December inclusive), mackerel strip, feathers, lugworm, ragworm, crab or prawns. A wide range of fish may be caught during the appropriate season including - cod, whiting, coley, pouting, thornback ray, mackerel, bass, garfish, pollack, scad, grey mullet, plaice, dabs, red mullet, wrasse, flounder, lesser spotted dogfish, black bream, gilthead bream and Couch's bream.

As this is a private fishery, permission rests with the Duchy or its licensee but recreational anglers are normally accepted.



Duchy of Cornwall Oyster Farm



For further information about the HVMCA and how you can become involved, look on the Helford Voluntary Marine Conservation Area website [www.helfordmarineconservation.co.uk](http://www.helfordmarineconservation.co.uk)

## Marketing

The marketing of the fishermen's catch is undergoing a renaissance with several operators now supplying directly to restaurants and shops. Others have built shellfish processing plants for their own catch and those of colleagues within the fleet (2009). Adding value locally is a good way to maintain incomes whilst working within industry constraints such as quotas and inclement weather.

The principal target species for today's Helford fleet is the angler or monkfish, though the by-catch value of shellfish can be significant. The strength of the Helford fleet is its ability to adapt to changing situations in both the fish stocks and the market place. With the addition of spider crab, sole, etc. the Helford fleet is estimated to contribute upwards of a million pounds annually to the local economy.

## Traditional fishing

Small-scale methods that are still employed include hand-lining for various species such as mackerel, pollack, bass, grey mullet and the occasional squid, as well as the familiar pots for lobsters, edible crabs, velvet crabs and spider crabs.

You can support Cornish fishing by buying sustainably-caught fish and seafood at local establishments.

## Sponsors

This leaflet has been financed by the National Aquarium Ltd.; 'National Aquarium Limited supports marine conservation and education projects aimed at increasing public awareness of the oceans'.

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Text thanks to C. Bean, D. M. Herdson, T. Opie and P. E. Tompsett