

## COLLECTIONS CORNER

### CHANGES WITH WILLOW IN NORTH ATLANTIC ANA- AND CATADROMOUS FISH TRAPS

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Using plant resources to catch animals is an activity found the world over. With them, fish have traditionally been caught by an array of means—spears, bows and arrows, poisons to kill or stun, and nets and traps of various shapes and sizes. Now, however, not only is the armoury changing with the introduction of synthetic replacements, but many wild animal resources are in decline and the livelihoods of their pursuers under threat. In time the skills to fashion the plants into the required weapon will disappear too—but need the weapons themselves? The answer may be found in the trapping of two migratory North Atlantic fish of contrasting lifestyles, both highly prized as food.

As an anadromous species, the salmon *Salmo salar* breeds in the freshwater of American and European rivers entering the North Atlantic, and winters in oceanic feeding grounds at some depth off Greenland, and between Iceland, Scandinavia and Scotland. During its ascent of rivers to its birthplace and its travels to and from its wintering grounds, the salmon is relentlessly fished. This overexploitation, along with pollution, habitat loss, hydropower dams and most recently aquaculture, have resulted in massive population declines in many parts of its range and near extinctions in countries such as Estonia, Poland, Portugal and the USA (WWF 2001). Prior to the discovery of its wintering grounds, it was the upriver migrations of the salmon that were mainly exploited. They played a significant role in local economies and ways of life; indeed, for example, the salmon is “central to the cultures of the Sami and Kven northern indigenous peoples” of Norway (WWF 2001).

At the mouth of the UK’s longest river, the Severn, a principal method of catching salmon used to be weirs (or ranks) comprising hundreds of basket traps mounted on a framework of stakes. These conical traps, known as putts (up to 14 feet [4.25 m] long) or putchers (much smaller; Fig. 1, 2), were placed in tiers three to four high across the flow of the river (Fig. 3, 4).

Traditionally they were made from woven branches of willow *Salix* spp. by the fishermen themselves. By the mid 1990s not only had the willow been largely replaced by aluminium (see images on [www.wyefoundation.org/estuary](http://www.wyefoundation.org/estuary)), but this whole method of trapping, whose earliest recorded use is perhaps AD 956 (Taylor 1974), had all but gone. By 1999 only seven licences were issued (CEFAS and Environment Agency 2000), and in 2000 fishermen holding two of them were compensated to release fish alive or not to catch them at all (CEFAS and Environment Agency 2001). The putcher in Fig. 1 was made by Severn fisherman Deryck Huby, one of



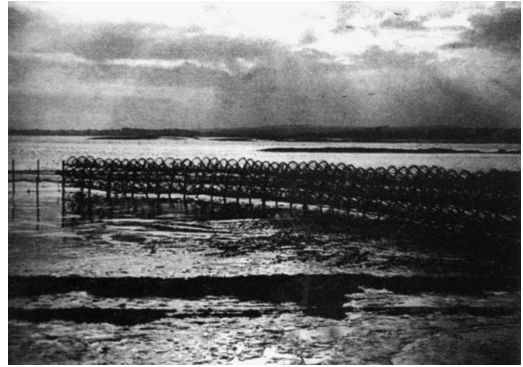
**Fig. 1.** A putcher made of willow *Salix triandra*, donated by Mr Deryck Huby, 1995, Gloucestershire, UK (EBC 73524). It is 160 cm long, with an aperture of 73 cm. (Andrew McRobb, RBG Kew.)



**Fig. 2.** Mr Deryck Huby on the banks of the River Severn with a putcher and a lave net. Shaped like a large Y, the net is used to scoop up salmon at low tide. It is made of *Salix triandra*, ash *Fraxinus excelsior*, and elm *Ulmus* sp. (H.D.V. Prendergast.)

these licensees and the only one, in 1995, still making and using willow putchers. The putcher, still (and evocatively) covered in seaweed, tells a finer story of the decline and disappearance of a whole way of life, and of the resource on which it was based, than any article or story. Visitors who see it, not least those from the UK, are usually astonished that the putcher comes not from a traditional, tropical community far afield but from their own cultural backyard. Other than the Severn river system, only the Usk in Wales had a putcher fishery in recent times—and, as on the Severn, its last license to take fish was removed in 2000 (CEFAS and Environment Agency 2001).

Of all the rivers in the UK, no river has a more famed fishery of eels *Anguilla anguilla* than the Severn; it is even the main source of eels eaten in Japan. A catadromous species,



**Fig. 3.** Fishing weir of salmon putchers on the River Severn. (© Gloucester Folk Museum.)

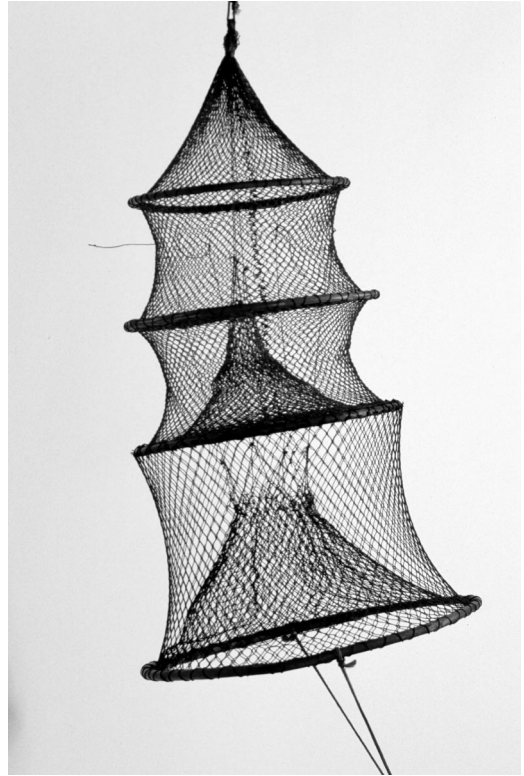
the eel breeds in the depths of the Sargasso Sea south east of Bermuda, from where over a period of three years its larvae drift eastwards to the shores of Europe. As elvers, they ascend the rivers in spring and then spend years growing in bodies of water, even reaching isolated ones overland, before beginning their return migration. In both cases the Severn fishery has long been important. Willow was used here and elsewhere in the UK (Fig. 5) and in Europe to trap eels, the earliest archaeological remains dating back to the Mesolithic (Butcher 1997). In Portugal traps of the type shown in Fig. 6 are still used on the Mondego river near Coimbra, each taking about 13 hours to make. Very similar items,



**Fig. 4.** Mr Herbert Woodward tending to his salmon putchers on the river Severn ca. 1964. (© Gloucester Folk Museum.)



**Fig. 5.** Eel trap, UK, date and locality unknown (EBC 41411). (Andrew McRobb, RBG Kew.)



**Fig. 6.** Eel trap made of *Salix* sp., Nazare, Portugal, donated by Teresa Almeida, 1997 (EBC 73909). (Andrew McRobb, RBG Kew.)

based on the same design, are now sold to tourists as lampshades but, for obvious reasons, they lack the central funnel (traditionally made of cotton, like all the netting) of the eel trap (Teresa Almeida pers. comm.).

In Poland, where eels, as well as salmon, have declined due to pollution, Butcher (1997) has noted a concomitant decline in trap making and knowledge of the techniques of production. In France she described how the remaining eel fishermen who still make their own traps are all elderly and have not taught their skills to anyone else, and how David Drew, a British artist inspired by a local eel trap maker, has created an eel trap (and other basketry) from *Salix purpurea* that, in his own words, “is a perfect example of form and function creating its own sculptural beauty.” It has become, for Butcher (1997), “a high-value exhibited artefact, an object of desire”—far from the craft that had its beginnings in meeting local subsistence demands.

The fate of the salmon and the eel in countries with relatively few subsistence life-styles and often depleted natural resources, and of the traps made to catch them, may in future be echoed elsewhere. One lesson is that the transmission of traditional skills could be important for earning a living in a new marketplace; instead of fish, the target becomes the consumer.

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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