In England’s Green and Pleasant Lands

I found myself on a beach facing the North Sea, thinking: I used to fish in that sea for many years. From the beach, from a boat, in middle of winter, it did not matter to me. ‘The colder the better,’ I used to think, as that would bring on the Cod bite.

Here I was on Dunwich beach in Suffolk looking at the row of hardened match-fishermen about half a mile to the south. Dunwich is an old fishing village about 70 miles from London along the east coast of England. The original City of Dunwich sank beneath the waves in the Middle Ages. Artifacts from the old town still come out of the cliffs as the erosion continues. Only twelve years ago, before I left for my walkabout, this beach still supported a hardy in-shore fishing fleet. They would launch their boats from the shingle beach and fish the fertile waters out to about ten miles. The men that manned the boats had lived this life for generations. It was from these hardy souls that Nelson manned his sailing gun ships against the might of the French at Trafalgar. He realized he was out shipped and responded with these words before he attacked the French, “They might be able to build ships, but they can’t build the English sailor.”

When England found its soldiers trapped on the beaches of Dunkirk in 1940, these same men navigated the small fishing boats that only travel at about 4 to 6 miles per hour to the rescue. They went down the coast of England, to the channel and across, to pull its soldiers off the beaches whilst facing the might of Hitler’s army and Luftwaffe.
Traditional East Coast fishing boats.

So what had happened to these fishermen? Where there were 40 boats, now there are 4. Every fishing village told the same story. “The fish stock has been depleted by over fishing,” is what I am told. The government has put in place stringent catch quotas that also make it harder for a fisherman to support a family and to make a living.

The story I am writing is about the rod and line fisherman. How has the lack of fish affected them? Long rods, worms, tents and strong legs is what is required by this group. They carry all the gear they need on their backs across this un-drivable shingle (small rock) beach. Not too long ago, a match with these 60 anglers could guarantee at least a few Cod in the 4lb range and maybe a 20 to 25lb Cod would be landed. Things, however, have changed.

Dunwich cliffs and match fishermen.

This image shows the Dunwich cliffs and match fishermen.
On the way to the group in the match I stopped and interviewed this young chap, Daniel Elliot, from Raydon, Suffolk. He is 14 years old and his dad was in the match.

Daniel Elliot.
He told me proudly how he loves to fish and that his dad was in the competition. I asked if his dad was any good and he said, “I like to think so.” He must be pretty good, as this boy knew what he was about. He could cast as good as any grown man and his set up was professional and ready to do the business. The rigging was all designed for long casting, and I bet he builds his own rigs. An English beach fisherman will spend a lot of time at home building rigs that he hopes will produce the dreamed of monster, and planning how to win the next tournament.

Moving down the beach I stopped to talk to an old salt, Roger Martin from Woodbridge.

Roger Martin
My first question to him was, “How long have you been fishing?” “At least 50 years,” was his answer. I asked how the fishing compares now to then. His answer, “it’s dropped off.” This means it has gotten worse. He went on to explain how this has affected his sport; “You would have to had been at the beach early to get a spot if a match was on.” A spot in a match is about 50 to 100 feet. Normally they are called a peg, allocated to you by the people putting on the tournament. He explained that the pleasure fisherman not in the match would always make sure that the match fishermen could have the allocated spot. He explained to me that the interest in the sport has waned along with the decline in sizable fish being caught. He does not believe that it has anything to do with pollution, as the sea is now cleaner than it ever was since he has been fishing. Common market regulation, making European countries responsible for the cleanliness of their inshore waters, and the decline of town’s dumping untreated sewage into the sea like they did when he was a boy, has led to cleaner waters. I thought it tasted different, and I noticed the lack of gulls that I remembered. He firmly laid the blame for the declining catches on the over fishing problem.

Moving down the beach, I was thinking that you don’t see a lot of women fishing in the UK. I figured it is cold and can be quite hard in foul weather and that may be why the women don’t fish. Then, the next person I came up to was Adele and her daughter, Emma. I was more than surprised to find that she was part of the England Sea Match Fishing Team. I asked her how long she had been fishing. She worked her way around the answer, not telling her age or how long she had been fishing. “A long time!” was the only response.

Adele loves the tournaments and has competed in quite a list of countries. First introduced to boat fishing by her husband, they now both compete in shore fishing matches. “You get chosen to represent your country by results,” she said. She fishes a club match in the week, then on the weekend she will travel around England to fish in larger tournaments. Her results are then sent to the England fishing selection.
organization. The top fisherwomen are chosen to fish a selection weekend. That’s a lot of commitment, and obviously Adele is quite a fisherwoman. Adele’s choice of reel was spinning, matched with a 12 to 13 foot English made Century rod. Adel has been in contact with me via E-mail and provided assistance with the match results.

Again pushing south, I was able to contact the organizer of this event, who was also running the match for the Suffolk County League, Wilf Cook.

Wilf Cook

I asked Wilf how the league was doing. He explained to me that in the last 3 years this league was down maybe 15%. The league is made up of teams from clubs or a group from work. Each team has six anglers. The league has four matches per year as well as a knockout cup. The prizes are made up from entry fees and raffles that they hold every match. The final match is a bit of a social affair, which of course has to end up in a pub. Well, it is England!

When asked how the fishing was, he answered that is has been very poor this year, although it had been very good last year with a lot of Cod being caught. We talked about the fact that a match the previous week had been won by a Bass. A bass this time of year is rare. Wilf pointed out that the seasons are not what they used to be. When he was younger, he said, the winters were a lot colder. “Its almost like you don’t get a change between the seasons now.” This is why fish may be turning up out of season, and maybe why the Cod did not arrive as they did last year. It’s just is not cold enough for them.

I told Wilf that when I used to fish at Felixstowe twelve years ago, it was nothing to land three or four Cod up to about six or seven pounds, and see 20lb Cod every month in the fishing magazines. Wilf explained that the decline started about eight years ago. Although we have good years, its not what we used to have, and it is getting slowly worse.

I then asked him about the availability of bait these days. He said “bait beds are not what they once were, and it is very difficult to dig bait. Also, it is very expensive and that might be why some people can’t afford to fish”.
Wilf has been involved in meeting with the fisheries people and explained that he thinks the declining fish stocks is partly due to the fact that Ministry of Agriculture are not protecting the breeding grounds. The commercial boys know it is easy pickings. Wilf insists that this has got to be stopped. I talked to Wilf about the success of the Texas inshore fishing and the fact that we have to have a license, and how the fees go towards policing and restocking. Wilf explained that he was a strong advocate of catch and release, and said the match fishermen are very concerned about fish welfare. He thinks that size violations are mainly recreational fishermen that don’t know what the rules are and keep everything they catch. He pointed out that the Sea Anglers Match Federation provides the rules for minimum size of fish in a match. They are larger than the Ministry of Agriculture require as the federation think that some of the minimums are too small. I found it interesting that they only have minimum size limits.

I asked him how he would feel about a license like we have in Texas. He indicated he would not have problems with it, but did not think that wardens would be necessary if people were educated to the importance of only keeping slot fish and practicing catch and release.

After talking to these fishermen, what conclusions can I make and what lessons can I say I’ve learned? I understand how the commercial fisherman is responsible for depleting the stocks to a dangerous level, but putting myself in the position of the commercial fisherman, I understand how they found themselves in a hopeless downward spiral. Having to feed your family, and a market demanding your products, which you have to provide from depleting fish stocks adds up to disaster. I am saddened by the demise of the inshore commercial fishermen. They were a very important part of the small English fishing towns, with the culture being weakened by their absence. The worm beds disappearing and it being harder to find bait was interesting and could be a main indicator of an environmental problem. It might be the worm beds that need policing, providing the food base for the Cod shoals. I know that no bait equals no fish. The match fishermen are as good as I have seen on my travels. All had neat camps, were self-efficient, and all equipment immaculate. I was very impressed by the work ethic and professional way the match fishermen fished. They were as committed and environmentally aware as any
group I have ever had the pleasure of meeting. I also realize how lucky I am to live in Texas, and the benefits I reap by the fish management we have in place. I think the English could benefit by taking a very serious look at what has been achieved here. You never know. In the future, we might see the old fishing families once again shake out the cobwebs from their fishing smocks and head back into the briny as guides and wardens, again taking advantage of a knowledge which could be lost.

Results from the match:

Section 1

1st P Cunningham, Viscount 14 1/4 oz
2nd P mills, Diss 10 1/4 oz
3rd A Collier, Southwold B, 9 oz

Section 2

1st M Topping, Kessingland 1 lb 9 1/4 oz
2nd R Clarice, Southwold A 1 lb 2 1/2 oz
3rd G Medlar, Southwold A 1 lb 1 1/2 oz

Section 3

1st S Adams, Stowmarket 1 lb 10 oz
2nd D Sadler, Penninsular Pirates 1 lb 3 1/4 oz
3rd R Jacobs, Southwold A 13 1/2 oz

Fish caught on the day were, Pout, Whiting, Codling, Rockling, Bass, Flounder and Dabs. The biggest fish of the match was a Bass of 1 lb 10 oz.

Count your blessing mates. Regards Nick Meyer