

EVERYONE'S GUIDE TO ST HELENA FISH & FISHERIES

by Trevor W. Hearl

“They have so great abundance of Fish about the Hand, that it seemeth a wonder wrought of God”, exclaimed the navigator of a Portuguese East Indiaman at St Helena in 1589, a wonderment echoed by sailors and scientists for four centuries. But for the last century or so, astonishment has been greater at the failure of the Colony’s fisheries to exploit this God-given resource. Almost as surprising, considering the eminent naturalist who, since Capt. Cook’s visit in 1775, have recorded the Island’s rich fish fauna, no book has been devoted to its study. That omission, at least, has now been well and truly remedied.



Fishermen, scientists and St Helenians will therefore welcome Alasdair Edwards’ *Fish and Fisheries of Saint Helena Island*. And if, as an armchair adventurer, ichthyology is an unknown world to you, let Dr Edwards guide you through the mysteries of Central Atlantic waters and you will discover a new dimension to “the St Helena story”. For this attractive book is far more than a manual of fish fauna; it is also a fascinating social and historical account of St Helena fishing, extending to the “mystery of the manatee” and even to celebrated sea serpents.

In writing for St Helenians as well as ichthyologists, the author vindicates his claim “to be readable as well as educational”. The book is copiously illustrated with no fewer than 94 line drawings and 70 colour photographs of fish, many seen for the first time, while the text is well serviced with graphs, glossary, maps, bibliography and index. It is, of course, a labour of love and, despite an occasional misprint, care in compilation is evidence in the range of typefaces, page headings, and seascape vignettes accompanying evocative extracts from Basil George’s *Call of the Seagull* and other St Helena poems. After introducing readers to the Island and ocean environment, it offers in Part I (pp. 1-53) a valuable summary of scientific enquiry spanning 200 years, from the reports of Johann Forster aboard HMS *Reso-*

lution in 1775, to the remarkable collection of Harvard Professor Arthur Loveridge who, having retired to St Helena, bequeathed 317 specimens of 65 species to the British (Natural History) Museum in the 1970s. A hundred years earlier, when John Melliss, doyen of St Helena naturalists, sent his collection of 137 specimens to the British Museum, one-third of them were unknown to science. In 1983, our author assiduously preserved no fewer than 354 specimens and examined 79 species. His review incidentally reveals the international nature of St Helena fish studies by quoting, after Forster, Loveridge and Melliss, Georges Cuvier, Achille Valenciennes, Albert Gunther, Theodor Mortensen and William Perrin, the American dolphin expert at St Helena in 1983.

Cousteau's caustic comments in 1974, ostensibly investigating Elephant Seals, are wisely ignored. After surveying early records, the doleful tale of abortive schemes and official enquiries into fisheries development - or lack of it - is outlined, from which it seems that catches, other than Skipjack, are no greater now than under the East India Company! Tuna provides the main theme for a more optimistic chapter on the fisheries today, to end Part I.

The comprehensive guide to the fishes of St Helena forms Part II (pp. 55-139), by which 138 species can be identified from the detailed illustrated descriptions of 63 families, listed by the St Helenian (and official) names, with a full index for easy reference.

In these conservation conscious times, it hardly seems necessary to justify publication of a work designed both to fill a gap in the world's "fish-map" and also to inform the local community. Yet the timely significance of this subject for Britain's second oldest Colony needs to be appreciated. As St Helena enters the 1990s, tiny and unproductive, fishing has at last become (says Edwards) "a mainstay of the Island's economy". Landings may not total 600 tons even in a good year, but for a community inured to failure, any productive venture carries valuable social and psychological benefits. What lessons can be learned from St Helena's even smaller dependency, Tristan da Cunha, is not asked, yet it must be wondered why that more isolated community, clinging to an inhospitable volcanic peak in the Roaring Forties, has a thriving crayfish industry, when St Helena, with its manifold advantages, has failed to develop its resources.

This book nevertheless assumes the future success of St Helena Fisheries. Its value to development studies might have been enhanced by a more robust analysis of past failures, a task Dr Edwards is uniquely qualified to tackle. Granted the issues are as tangled as a cat's cradle, embedded in enough reports to fill a pantech-nicon, with "the relics of controversy" overfishing as old as the community itself (as Canon Walcott warned readers of *The St Helena Magazine* 56 years ago during a former rumpus). Indeed, even as this book went to press, and ODA's Natural Resources Institute at Chatham planned a St Helena fish lunch to publicize its products - stressing their environment-friendly origins caught by longlines in pollution-free waters - suspicious fishermen were marching on The Castle in Jamestown with petitions protesting against agreements to lease fishing licenses in "their waters". Shades of the 1890s when a scheme "to develop the Fishing Industry" prompted a

complaint in *The St Helena Guardian* that “it seems cruel for outsiders to creep into the waters of St Helena”. But how can people judge the pros and cons without briefing?

Attempts to explain have often been superficial. On the one hand, locally, fishermen were blamed for indolence. Even the benevolent Governor Sterndale, comparing sportsmen’s landings with fish supplies in the market, reproached them in 1898 for “want of energy”, but visiting expert J.T. Cunningham was less critical in 1910: “Landsmen who have little experience of sea fishing are apt to accuse fishermen of idleness, but it must be remembered that the fishermen’s life is hard, and his earnings small and uncertain”, and recognition of such labours earned Richard Yon (1869-1950) the British Empire Medal. Outsiders, on the other hand, found Government leadership lacking; the Committee of the Great International Fisheries Exhibition of 1883 could not believe that an island surrounded by fish had nothing to exhibit.

Yet, as the philanthropist Alfred Moseley discovered to his cost in 1910, there could be more mysterious reasons for the lack of fish at St Helena - like Halley’s Comet, as fishermen told him. Unfortunately, the problems are more deep-rooted in the Island’s social fabric than fishing reports date hint. With an endemic tension between Government policies and public indifference (if not resistance) to change, St Helena has never enjoyed a healthy climate for the development of a productive economy.

Alasdair Edwards’ book is a landmark in the literature of St Helena’s natural history. For fish it will be the definitive study well into the next century; for fisheries it provides a foundation upon which future analyses of commercial development will be based. *Fish and Fisheries of Saint Helena Island* is published by the Centre for Tropical Coastal Management Studies, University of Newcastle-upon-Tyne, for St Helena’s Education Department - whose officers are to be congratulated for fostering this authoritative publication. (May it prompt a new edition of Pamela Lawrence’s *St Helena Cooking*, putting fish on the menu!). Publishing for St Helena is financially not for the fainthearted, but thanks to permission from the U.N. Food & Agriculture Organization to use its drawings, and subsidy from the Governor of St Helena’s Discretionary Fund, copies of this limited edition (1,000) will retail at £15 (non-net).

Those interested in securing copies of this book may purchase them from the Education Department on St Helena and in the United Kingdom from Waterstone’s Booksellers, 88 The Promenade, Cheltenham, Glos., GL50 1NB.

South Atlantic Chronicle, October 1990, Vol. XIV, No. 4, pp. 9-10.

© A.H. Schulenburg. Reproduced with permission.

*Note: Hearl was misled by false claims made by Governor Henry L Gallwey [1911 Annual Colonial Report: St Helena, No 714’ (London: Colonial Office, 1912), 13.] and an exaggerated and heavily embellished account published by Philip

Gosse [Philip Gosse, *St Helena 1502-1938* (Oswestry: Anthony Nelson, 1938), 348–8].

An investigation into Alfred Moseley’s philanthropic support of St Helena [Bruce, Ian. ‘Alfred Mosely’. *Wirebird: The Journal of the Friends of St Helena* 46 (2017)] showed there was no shortage of fish in 1910. Instead, Gallwey tried to purchase the fish at too low a price so that most of the catch went to market, being bought by islanders in the usual way.

A small production team working on the wharf from February 1910 were misleadingly termed a “factory” by Gallwey. This led Gosse to presume a factory was built. The team assembled barrels of salted fish for export, with a few fish canned by hand for the purpose of providing samples. Gosse mistakenly assumed all the fish was canned and then enhanced the story by claiming the failure of the project led to “empty tins in thousands”. Some 98 barrels of cured mackerel were exported, much of it to New York. This sold at a loss of seven shillings a barrel. Mosely decided to cease production in January 1911. Reporting the fiasco to the Colonial Office, Gallwey incorrectly claimed they had been a shortage of fish in 1910 (the catch was little different from 1909), comparing the quantity caught in 1910 with an extraordinarily large catch recorded for a single month a century earlier, in September 1813.



A “Factory” (i.e. island workers) processing cured fish on wharf, 1910

At least Gallwey admitted that fish were caught in 1910 but Gosse later embellished the facts, presumably to tell an even better story, and claimed there were no fish that year:

“Fishermen had been engaged, the factory built, the new machinery was in order, the empty tins in thousands were there in which the mackerel were to be hermetically sealed. And there were no mackerel! Never before had there been no mackerel. The experts were unable to offer any explanation of this sudden lack of mackerel; only the St Helenians knew - it was all due to a comet which had unexpectedly crossed the heavens at the time the factory was opened. For ten months the factory and the canners waited in vain for any mackerel to can and then the factory was shut down [..]”.

Gosse was a raconteur, and could certainly write an interesting story, but the above statement was almost entirely inaccurate – apart from one fact, because there was indeed a comet in 1910. In fact, there were two comets that year. Of these, Gosse most likely referred to the Great January Comet of 1910 (designated C/1910 A1), often referred to as the Daylight Comet because it was very bright and visible during the day. It was first seen in South Africa in January 1910, a few weeks before the cured fish production started. Halley’s Comet was also visible in May 1910, but this later date makes it less likely.