

Report

TRAINING, THE LINK BETWEEN FISHING AND TOURISM IN FINNISH LAPLAND [FINLAND]

The missing link

In the far north of Finland, fishermen have turned to tourism to diversify and increase their income. The process began with a training programme supported by Axis 4 of the European Fisheries Fund.

"In North Finnish dialect, the expression 'go fishing' translates as, 'go and ask if you can have fish'." This remark by the manager of the Northern & Eastern Lapland FLAG, Markku Ahonen, is as deep as the lakes and forests of this part of Europe, located more than 150 km north of the Arctic Circle. It reflects a mentality, and perfectly captures the essence of all that Lapland is and can offer, provided that one respects its unique environment and its abundant resources. It can also be a great way to welcome holidaymakers "from the south", who are coming in ever-increasing numbers to try their hand at fishing tourism, with all the thrills it entails, like catching a 60 cm-long pike almost as soon as you cast your line into the river, or sledging on a frozen lake, to accompany a fisherman as he gathers in his nets spread beneath the ice.



▲ Fish is a star of the show at the Midnight Sun Film Festival.

The FLAG area is the second largest of the 303 areas covered by Axis 4 of the European Fisheries Fund (EFF)⁸. At 33 500 km², it covers an area larger than Belgium! *"The distance between settlements is a constant challenge in our work," says Markku Ahonen, "but it is also a tremendous opportunity, because where else can you find such expanses of wilderness in Europe?"*

And he could have added: and such large stretches of fresh water in the EU, apart from Lakes Vänern and Vättern in Sweden, Lake Saimaa in Finland, and Lake Peipsi in Estonia⁹? The Northern and Eastern Lapland fisheries area has over 3 000 km² of inland waters, including 1 040 km² for Lake Inari alone. These waters are full of fish, of which six species are commercially exploited: whitefish, trout, perch, vendace, burbot and pike. But in recent years, the sector has experienced some setbacks, which have forced fishermen to find additional sources of income.

Alternative sources of income

In the early 2000s, the municipality of Sodankylä (population 9 000, spread across 12 445 km²!), one of the 11 municipalities in the Axis 4 zone, had professional fishermen who caught mostly whitefish, but the mandatory switch from the pound net to the gill net led to more selective fishing, which caused overpopulation of whitefish, and then an infection of this species by a parasite, *Triaenophor crassus*. Between 70% and 90% of stocks were affected in 2009. To compensate, fishermen turned to perch and pike, but demand for these species was lower at that time, so their incomes collapsed and half the fishermen left the industry.

The remaining 20 fishermen began to look at alternative sources of income, and tourism emerged as the most promising option. *"It was an obvious choice,"* Hanna-Leena Talvensaari, manager of the Leader Local Action Group (LAG) of Northern Lapland, the supporting structure for the FLAG. *"We get close to a million visitors a year, just over half of them in winter. Tourism is growing and this is the sector that holds the greatest potential for development."*

⁸ The Eastern Finland fisheries area (FI05) is large.

⁹ See FARNET Magazine No. 5.



▲ Lake Lokka.

It is also the main thrust of our Leader programme, with many projects carried out by village associations (hiking and mountain bike trails...), and support for many small tourism businesses and the organisation of festive events. The project that the fishermen proposed to the FLAG complemented the process started with Leader particularly well."

The fishermen turned to the FLAG, which had just been set up at that time. "We immediately felt that they were listening, says one of the fishermen we met, there was excellent collaboration between the FLAG and the municipality and, thanks to that collaboration, we were able to get the backing of a lot of the fishermen, who were closely involved from the outset".

Preliminary discussions started with the municipality in July 2009. As a first step, a needs assessment questionnaire was developed jointly and sent to all the full-time fishermen. A month later, the outline of the project was defined with the assistance of the FLAG: the fishermen wanted to sign up for a training programme focused on two main objectives – acquiring the skills and statutory authorisations required to cater for and carry fee-paying passengers; devising and developing structured tourism products based on fishing.



▲ First aid was an important part of the training.

A grant application was prepared by Marjo Harjula, the tourism adviser at the municipality, with the assistance of the FLAG. In October, the application was validated by the FLAG and submitted to the managing authority, which approved it in November, for an initial amount of €78 000.

"The basic idea is to ensure that the tourist experiences what the full-time fisherman experiences, by fishing themselves or by watching the fisherman at work. In the latter case, we can really talk about pesca-tourism", says Kaisa Annala, the person in charge of the first phase of the project (see box). "But whatever form it takes, what was required first and foremost was for the fishermen to learn the basic skills and take the various exams to obtain the necessary authorisations."

The training initially consisted of courses on safety (first aid, a licence to sail with tourists on board, knowledge of relevant legislation...) before focusing on customer service and product development (see details in text box). Each course was taught by an instructor specialising in the subject concerned. A total of 20 fishermen participated in both phases of the training and 10 are now qualified to take tourists on excursions.

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A comprehensive training programme

The tourism training programme for the fishermen of Sodankylä was held in two phases, each complemented by five study trips (visits to businesses and tourism exhibitions). The courses included were as follows:

1st phase (2010-2011)

- > Licence to carry passengers: 1 day
- > First aid: 2 days
- > Safety at work and certification: 1 day
- > Training in safety procedures: 1 day
- > Product development (collective and individualised training): 2 days
- > 5 study visits

2nd phase (2012-2013)

- > Consumer safety (legislation): 1 day
- > Development of fishing tourism as a product: 1 day
- > Training in English terminology specific to fishing tourism: 1 day
- > Public grants available for the promotion of tourism: 1 day
- > Introduction to social media: 2 days
- > First Aid: 1 day
- > Rescue activities on and around water: 1 day
- > Greeting and guiding customers: 1 day
- > Specifications and quality charter: 1 day
- > Running the excursion ("story telling"): 3 days
- > Russian culture and language: 2 days
- > 5 study trips to fairs
- > Product development (individualised training): 1 day



Second generation

Ninety kilometres east of the town of Sodankylä, but still in the same municipality, is the village of Lokka, with a population of less than 100 people, mostly reindeer herders or fishermen. Of the fishermen, 15 are registered as full-time professionals. "It is only the second generation of fishermen," says Markku Ahonen, "because commercial fishing only started here after the creation of the reservoir lake in 1967." Lokka is located beside the dam that turned part of the upper Luiro river into a huge lake of 244 km³, containing rich fish stocks. "After the land was flooded, their parents turned to fishing, but mainly as a subsistence activity. Then the second generation of fishermen turned fishing into a real business activity, with a keen focus on quality. Fish from Lokka has an excellent reputation in the food industry in Finland." In 1997, the local fishermen set up the "Natural Resources Cooperative of Lokka", which now runs a municipally-owned processing unit for filleting, freezing and packing of fish. Most of the production is transported by truck to the south of Finland. "It takes 32 hours from the time the fish is caught until it goes on sale in Helsinki, 1 000 km from Lokka," says Risto Pyhäjärvi, a member of the cooperative and vice-chairman of the FLAG. "About 10% of our fish is sold directly to hotels and restaurants in Lapland and central Finland. The rest is bought by wholesalers, but we are currently developing our own distribution system to cut out the middlemen and get better prices."

As its name suggests, the cooperative is not limited to fishing, although that is its main activity. "Fishing generates 85% of the turnover of the cooperative, the rest is divided equally for the moment between the catering service that we provide to the village school, reindeer meat marketing and tourism. For a variety of reasons, including the problems we encountered with whitefish in 2009-2010, we decided to develop the latter activity."

Budget

Costs (EUR)	Axis 4 of the EFF	National	Municipality of Sodankylä	Total
Phase I	30 186	40 014	7 800	78 000
Phase II	33 058	43 820	8 542	85 420
Total	63 244	83 834	16 342	163 420

Having organised themselves in this way, nine fishermen from Lokka participated in the fishing tourism training programme. *"We were already familiar with a form of tourism, through chance encounters and holidaymakers who come to Lokka, but we wanted to do it professionally and also develop pesca-tourism."*

Winter-time nature tourism

Risto and two colleagues from the cooperative, who are also certified, now offer six of the 11 tourism products developed during the training course (see text box). *"Together, we are able to cater for groups of up to a busload of people."* Some services are provided under the banner of the cooperative as a whole, but the majority are provided by individuals. In 2012, the first year of operation, Risto took around sixty tourists on a fishing or pesca-tourism trip, which gave him twenty days' work.

Most trips take place in the winter, which is convenient, as the fishing in Lokka is quieter between January and March.

This opinion is shared by Hanna-Leena Talvensaari, coordinator of the Leader group: *"The best opportunities are most clearly to be found in winter-time nature tourism. For the visitor, it is winter that offers the most thrilling and authentic experiences with skiing, snowmobiling, dog sledding and now pesca-tourism. For the territory, this is when tourism has the biggest economic impact: the winter holidaymakers tend to be affluent and on the lookout for new experiences. In summer, there are events like the Midnight Sun Film Festival¹⁰, but our visitors are mostly people in motor-homes, who are more self-reliant and who spend less. In both cases, however, the tourists know what they want and you can't fool them."*

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¹⁰ Festival organised since 1986 by film directors Mika and Aki Kaurismäki in Sodankylä, attended by the cream of world cinema.



▲ Ice fishing on Lake Lokka.

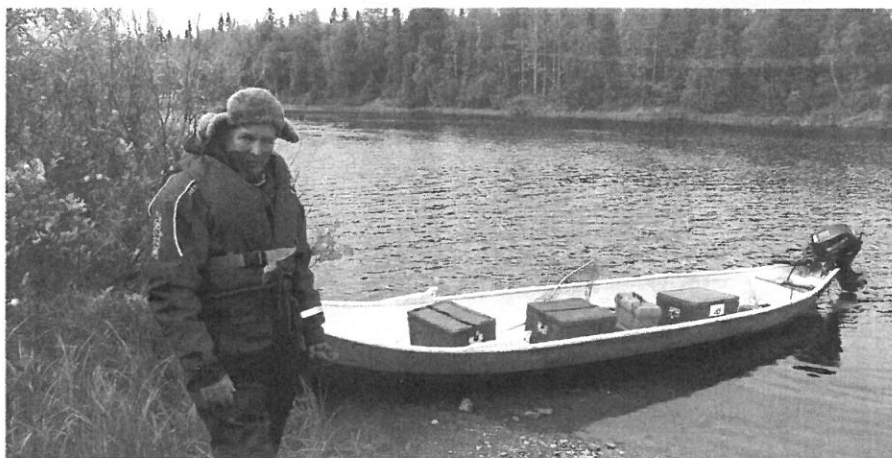


▲ River fishing on the Luiro.

Eleven fishing tourism products

Tour	Where	Duration	When	Group size	Price
Ice fishing	Lake Lokka	3 hours	Jan-Apr	3 persons mini.	€ 85/pers.
Wintertime net fishing	Lake Lokka	3 hours	Jan-Apr	3 persons mini.	€ 65/pers.
Winter fishing	Lake Lokka	7 hours	Xmas-May	1-4 persons	€ 200* + € 30/pers.
Wintertime seine fishing	Lake Unari	3 hours 8 hours	Dec-Apr	1-20 persons	€ 150-190* € 220-280*
Winter outing – Net fishing	Lake Lokka	3 hours	Nov-Apr	2-4 persons	€ 70/pers.
River fishing	River Luiro	6 hours	Jun-Sep	4 persons	€ 240* + € 15/pers.
River fishing	River Sattasjoki	7 hours	Open water season	1-2 persons	€ 480* + € 25/pers.
Summer fishing	Lake Lokka	6 hours	Jun-Oct		€ 180* + € 70/pers.
Open water fishing	Lake Unari	1 hour	Open water season	1-20 persons	€ 20/pers.
Canoe trip	River Postojoki	2 days 1 night	Jun-Oct	1-3 persons	€ 410* + € 70/pers.
Cloudberry tour	Pomokaira Sodankylä	6 hours	End of summer	1-4 persons	€ 170* + € 25/pers.

*Fixed fee for equipment.



▲ Risto Pyhäjärvi and his river fishing boat.

Marketing

"Demand is growing, slowly but surely," says the tourism official, Marjo Harjula. "Today, we have something structured to offer visitors. There are now seven fishermen who have all the necessary authorisations, qualifications and skills to provide quality services. Previously, in terms of fishing, we had to offer 'basic' products with no real value-added, just pitches on lakes and rivers for individual anglers..."

"What we need to work on now is marketing. But that takes time," says Risto Pyhäjärvi. The 11 packages developed during the training programme have been presented twice in Helsinki: at Riihimäen Erämessut, the largest hunting and fishing fair in Finland, in June 2012; and at MATKA-messut, the largest travel show in Northern Europe in January 2013.

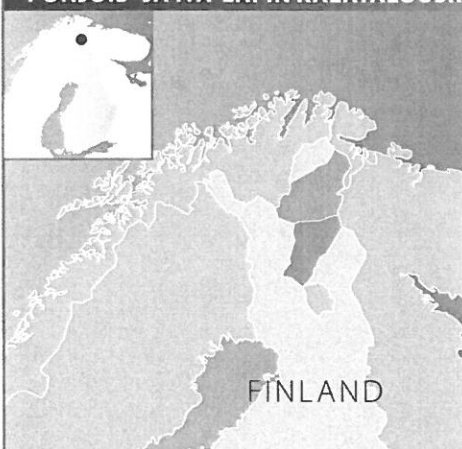
Fishing tourism in Sodankylä will be the subject of a national television programme this year. It is also promoted by the major ski resort of Pyhä-Luosto, but primarily the marketing is carried out through the website and brochures of the municipality, on Facebook, by the fishermen themselves, and often by word of mouth, which may explain why all the customers so far have been Finnish.

The project has been replicated in other parts of Finland: the FLAG of Vakka-Suomi has undertaken similar actions, and the Gulf of Bothnia FLAG is planning to do the same. Markku Ahonen has also received requests for information from a Danish group and other FLAGs elsewhere in Europe, especially after the presentation of the project at the FARNET conference in November 2011 in Brussels (see FARNET Magazine No. 5).

But now, one year on, what do the people to whom it matters most, the fishermen, think about it? "Since you ask me, I have three tips to give," says Risto Pyhäjärvi. "First of all, take training courses, this is essential; Secondly, keep an open mind; and lastly, put your individualism aside, and socialise with your customers. But the most important thing is to enjoy it. What I like about tourism is being able to make people happy, espe-

cially the children. Being there when someone makes their first catch, sharing the joys and frustrations of my job, this makes me happy too. That's what motivates me." ■

POHJOIS- JA ITÄ-LAPIN KALATALOUSRYHMÄ (Finland)



Area:
33 500 km²

Population:
25 000 inhabitants

Density:
0.75 inhabitants/km²

Axis 4 Budget (2008-2011)	EUR			
	EU	National	Municipal	Total
Total	240 000	319 200	56 800	616 000

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