

BRIXHAM'S BLACK GOLD

By Mike Warner

One of the main attributes of a true mixed fishery is the ability for its exponents to sustainably target seasonal opportunities, regardless of gear or sector. None is more true than in the South West of England and for the beamer fleet located at the iconic and well supported market in Brixham, where this year's season for cuttlefish is just getting underway.

The European Cuttlefish (*Sepia officinalis*), a Cephalopod, is targeted in the autumn in these waters as the fleet here switches from the standard targeting of mixed whitefish in order to maximise the opportunity that this non-quota species affords. The importance of this unique fishery is now considerable with this particular port landing a gargantuan 3260 tonnes in 2015 for a market value of £6M. A relatively recently established fishery, it's interesting to note that commercial landings have really only existed since the late 80's.

Destined primarily for the far-eastern markets of Japan and Korea, cuttlefish now sit at an important fifth place, in terms of overall shellfish rankings just behind nephrops. European export opportunities exist too, with a significant tonnage findings way to Italy and Spain, where its flesh is an important and much sought after ingredient in Mediterranean diets, substituting readily for the more expensive squid and packing just as much flavour.

Barry Young, MD of Brixham Trawler Agents, who run the action here, has long since recognised the contribution that cuttlefish make to the success and vitality of the port.

"Both Over and Under 10m vessels target the cuttlefish with both mobile and static gear. The majority of the landings come from the beamers though and we're just starting to see the first good hauls of the season. It's become such an importance feature here that we're renamed it 'Brixham Squid' ", he grins.



Having spawned inshore earlier in the summer, the cuttles then shift in a seasonal migration offshore to deeper water often following their prey species - juvenile cod, flatfish and crustacea that ultimately dictate their movements.

Barry is obviously excited that such renewed interest in the product has sparked an upwards trend in prices seen on the premier Devon market, with boxes fetching upwards of £100/each for the skippers. With such a seasonal opportunity available with a consistently good return, local merchants and buyers seize the moment with competition fierce for the "black gold"

Local beamer skipper Mike Sharpe, of the Emelia Jayne BM10 relishes the season and switching over from the regular haul of mixed plaice, soles and monk is no hardship, as no real change in gear is necessary in order to target the cuttles.

"The more you land, the better the price," he advises. "Everyone gears up at this time of year, from the market to the merchants and although there's a noticeable drop in the amount of other white fish landed, that also has an impact on price with better money being paid for species where there is a shortfall."

Mike reckons that the cuttles present them a win/win situation.

Less handling and cleaning apart from a blast from the deck wash, means that a speedy turnaround can be effected. Mike also points out that as many of the boats have already caught their quota by now, the cuttles represent a timely bonus and the bounty can often continue to be fished right through the winter.

So important is the fishery now, that it constitutes about a third of the overall landings at Brixham. Barry Young is keen to progress things further in a port where efficiency and attention to detail are the main watch words.

"My general manger Matt Bailey has just returned from Norway, where he's been looking at a new automated bulk handling system that might suit our needs with the cuttles," he tells me. "Up until now everything is manually handled and with an increasing volume being landed we need to look to improve efficiencies and cut out costs where we can. An automatic handling and weighing system would mean passing on more of a margin to the skippers and at the end of the day that's what we're all about at Brixham- adding value."

I learn that the new machinery that they're looking at has been designed to handle heavier bulk fish such as salmon, but with minimal adaption, it looks like it will easily fit in and prove useful

too for other species that don't require grading.

Jim Portus, CEO of the South West Fish Producers Organisation (SWFPO) is equally keen to highlight the fact that cuttlefish is a catch opportunity that represents value across the fleet at Brixham.

"Even the scallopers can pitch in," he states. "They'll swap over from dredges to beams at this time of the year and target the cuttles too. Although it's quite a messy product to deal with, there really is minimal handling for them, with the fish going straight from the net to the box. Less cost and considerably less effort.

We're extremely lucky that we have this opportunity year after year," he continues. "And although the majority of the sales reside abroad, through tactical marketing and promotion, I can see a time when an increasing proportion of the (more expensive) squid in this country is replaced with cuttle meat. In fact its beginning to happen already with local chefs capitalising on the great value it represents when compared to squid and other molluscs.

Jim believes it's a trend that'll continue and Brixham is now firmly on the map and poised to deliver.

"Calamari is king" he announces. "Especially when it's a cuttle!"

CUTTLEFISH



The cuttlefish is a small-medium sized mollusc that is found throughout the ocean waters of the world. In the same way as their squid and octopus relatives, cuttlefish have a large, elongated body with tentacles surrounding their mouths.

Cuttlefish are found in large numbers throughout the world's ocean waters from the warm, tropical shallows to the cold depths of the deep ocean. Cuttlefish are well known for the "flashing" colours that are displayed on their bodies during fighting and mating. In the same way as squid and octopuses, the cuttlefish also has an ink sack which ejects ink in order to fool oncoming predators.

There are 120 known species of cuttlefish found across the globe which vary in size from just 15 cm to the Australian giant cuttlefish which is often half a meter in length (not including its tentacles) and weighs more than 10kg.

The cuttlefish is a carnivorous animal that primarily preys on small crustaceans such as shrimp and crabs, but the cuttlefish also eats alot of fish. The cuttlefish uses its ability to change body colour to hide itself, before catching its prey with the sucker-pads on the end of its long tentacles which bring the prey into the sharp beak of the cuttlefish.

Due to the generally relatively small size of the cuttlefish, there are numerous marine predators that hunt them. Large fish, sharks and even other cuttlefish (sometimes of the same species) are the most common predators of the cuttlefish.

During the mating season, male

cuttlefish change their body colours in order to successfully attract a female. Some male cuttlefish have even been known to make themselves look like female cuttlefish in order to trick the dominant males and stealing their mates. The female cuttlefish lays around 200 small eggs and sadly dies soon afterwards.



Mike Sharpe Skipper Emelia Jayne.