

Fresh from the TRAP

Finnish lake netters fight to keep their small-scale and ancient fishery

By Paul Molyneux

Ukkko means *grandfather* in Finnish, and it's what 15-year-old Emil Tervonen calls 67-year-old Markku Tervonen. Emil asks his ukko a question as they prepare to check their fish traps. Markku says something back, directing Tero Mustonen and me to a skiff the Emil will run. There's no sense asking for a translation on every utterance. What's important gets communicated, and there is no urgency here.

Markku and his 72-year old partner, Asko Karjalainen, have been fishing for vendace in the lakes around Kesälahti, Finland, since 1969, and working as a team for the last 20 years. Vendace, also known as European cisco, are small schooling salmonids that have long been an important part of Finland's national cuisine. During World War II, they were vital.

Markku and Asko lift a stack of plastic totes and one filled with ice into their 20-foot skiff. Markku starts the 20-hp Tohatsu engine, and off they go. Emil fires up the Tohatsu on our skiff, and we follow. "How long have you been fishing?" I ask the young man. "I don't know," he says.

"He's always been here," says Tero. "He's in our video." In 2014-16, Tero's organization, Snowchange, which works with small-scale fishermen all around the circumpolar region, made a video about the local practice of fishing for vendace by seining under the ice in winter — when the largest catches are landed.

We are in the Lake District of Karelia, an ethnic region that spans the border of Finland and Russia at around latitude 62 N, and has been occupied by the Karelian people since prehistoric times.

"We are endemic, not indigenous," says Tero. "Originally, our language and culture comes from the east. Linguistically, we are the westernmost outpost of Siberia."

Markku and Asko reach the first fish trap. It's largely invisible. The buoys of what Tero calls "the guide net" stretch out from the shore of a small island to a configuration of buoys that delineate the area of the trap itself. Markku stops the engine. Asko reaches down from the bow, grabs a handful of the net and starts to pull it aboard. They work the skiff under one end of the trap and prepare to underrun it.

Once Asko has gotten the boat under the twine, he climbs up onto the deck of the bow and holds one buoyed seam of the trap, his hands protected by rubber mittens. Markku, in the stern, puts on his rubber mittens and picks up the other seam. They built this trap together, and together they begin to haul the boat along under the fine mesh twine, pushing the vendace toward what Tero calls "the nest."

As they come to the end of the trap, small silver fish start to flash near the surface. The vendace are about 6 to 8 inches long. Lake Pyhäjärvi and Lake Puruvesi vendace in particular command a high price in the market. "The bones are softer," says Tero.

Markku looks into the net, where splashing vendace fill only a small corner. As Asko pulls up the twine, Markku brails the little fish out with a dipnet and dumps them into a plastic tote. Another tote sits ready with ice.

It doesn't take long. They slide their skiff out from under the twine, with a mere 40 kilos, and head for the next trap.

"Here we will be close to the Russian border," says Tero.





The fiberglass boats, gas engines and synthetic twine are recent upgrades, but the Kesälahti vendace fishery has existed unbroken for more than 600 years.

“Perhaps only a few kilometers. It is well patrolled. We must be careful.” From December 1939 until March 1940, little Finland held off the Russians for 100 brutal days in the Winter War, and there remains among the Finnish people a keen awareness of their powerful neighbor.

While remaining a student of history, Tero focuses on the more current threats to the lake fishery, ranging from outmigration of the region’s youth to fluctuating markets and pressure to bring trawlers into the lake.

“The government is advocating for them. Here we have a very top-down resource management. They have tried it in nine other lakes, and it has ruined them,” Tero says. “You

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— Tero Mustonen, Finnish fisherman

can’t have trawlers in lakes. But some fishermen make a great profit from it.”

According to Tero, the trap fishery in Lake Puruvesi and the other Kesälahti lakes is the oldest unbroken communal commercial

fishery in Finland.

“The first record of this fishery is from the 1300s. We have had a closely knit transfer of knowledge and are making a case for comanagement. We have received the EU’s protected geographical indication (PGI) status — a label for our boxes that says these fish are Puruvesi fish. We also are part of the intangible Finland heritage, and could possibly become a Unesco World Heritage Site. We’re looking into it. That would also protect us.”

After hauling the second trap, Markku and Asko have barely 200 pounds aboard. They head back toward home, with one more trap to empty on the way. They reach it and again poke the bow in and lift the twine over the boat. As they pull themselves along under the last trap, driving the fish to the nest, vendace begin to boil the surface, and they see the kind of haul that makes them smile. Asko again holds the twine while Markku brails the vendace and occasional bycatch into boxes. A big whitefish thrashes among the vendace, along with a yellow perch. “That’s my favorite,” says Emil, pointing to the perch.

“I fell in just once,” says Asko standing on the bow. “It was in October. Very cold. As soon as I landed in the water, I remembered my PFD was on the other boat.” He laughs, and Markku, smoking a cigarette shakes his head, laughing. “I could have gotten back aboard myself,” says Asko. “But Markku grabbed me by the belt and pulled me up.”



Tero Mustonen photos

Markku Tervonen and Asko Karjalainen build their own traps and are actively passing their skills to the next generation, including Markku’s 15-year-old grandson, Emil.



Tero Mustonen

Markku Tervonen brails vendace (European cisco) from the “nest” of his trap. Vendace are a traditional staple in Finnish cuisine.

“It was the first time I caught a seal that wasn’t protected,” says Markku. “I was allowed to take him home.” The Kesälahti lakes are home to the Saimaa ringed seal, *Pusa hispida saimensis*, of which only 400 remain, and fish trappers have to be careful not to catch them.

Herring gulls follow the boat as it heads back to shore, Markku flips small fish over the

side, and the birds dive for it. “It’s bycatch,” says Tero, “similar to vendace, but it is a cyprinid not a salmonid.” Some of the bony bream go over the side, too. “Some years ago, those would have been a great prize,” says Tero. He notes that markets are changing. “The young mothers would rather buy a farmed salmon fillet from Norway than vendace that has not been gutted.”

Label for the lakes

➔ Antti Peosnen worked as a freshwater biologist up until 30 years ago, when he took up fishing for a living. He works Lake Paasvesi in Savonranta Village further west, just outside of Karelia.

“Nobody was fishing here,” Peosnen says. “There was only whitefish, not much vendace.” Now in his mid-60s, Antti has built a small-scale, vertically integrated business, catching, processing and selling a variety of lake fish at the local market three times a week. He checks his fish traps twice a week, and we climb aboard his aluminum skiff to empty two traps, one of which is experimental seal-proof trap provided by the government.

When we reach the trap, Antti hooks up a pneumatic hose to a gas-powered compressor. The compressor pumps air into flotation bags on the trap, and it slowly rises out of the lake, an 8-meter fyke net with 2-meter rings and a paltry catch. Antti pulls his skiff up the end of the trap under a chute. He opens a door and the fish slide easily into a tote he has ready. He picks a few whitefish, perch and bream from the tote and dumps the rest overboard. They swim away.

Antti’s second trap is a traditional fyke net, a series of hoops and funnels that trap fish in the little cod end. Again he picks a few marketable fish out of his haul and returns the rest, alive to the lake. “It was cold the last few days,” he says. “The pike and walleye are not moving.”

According to Antti, he found out about the geographic indicator program eight years ago and started the paperwork. “In December 2013 we got it,” he says. “Before that, fishermen from other lakes would say their vendace was from Puruvesi, and they would get a higher price. Now we have our label.” — P.M.

On the shore of Puruvesi, at the communally run Kesälahti Fish Base, of which Snowchange is a member, Markku and Asko unload four boxes of vendace, 196 kilos, or about 430 pounds. The fish sell for a little over 2 euros a kilo — roughly \$500 worth of fish, caught and boxed for shipping before noon.

Markku and Asko’s expenses are minimal. The 20-hp engine burned barely a gallon of fuel, and they build all their own gear.

“They split the money,” Tero says. “After they pay us for the fish base, that is.” A truck will come in early afternoon and take the fish to Helsinki and other places, and it will bear the geographical indicator certifying that it comes from the traditional Kesälahti trap fishery.

Unlike many places in the world, the fisheries in the lakes are improving, increasing from a low in the 1990s.

Markku and Asko say that up until this year, they have had the best years of their lives. But they catch the bulk of the landings in winter, seining under the ice. “We are losing the ice by one third,” says Markku. “Global warming. This year it was only 20 centimeters thick. Not safe.”

According to Tero, the fishermen are shifting more effort to the trap fishery. “They are adapting,” he says.

Paul Molyneux is the Boats & Gear editor for National Fisherman.



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Antti Peosnen empties fish from an experimental trap designed to protect the Saimaa ringed seal, of which only 400 are left in Finland’s lakes.