

Developing seal-safe trap-nets

East Finland FLAG

Lake Saimaa, Finland

Project overview

The freshwater, Saimaa ringed seal is the only endemic mammal of Finland and the most endangered seal species in the world. One of the main dangers it faces is drowning in fishing nets. However, this also implies serious losses for fishermen who see their nets broken and large proportions of their catch eaten by seals. Fishermen have now worked with conservationists and scientists to develop trap-nets that protect their catch without harming preying seals.



Conservation measures to protect the Saimaa ringed seal, including the banning of trap nets, significantly affect commercial fishing conditions in the area – and the livelihood of the 30 households that earn their living by fishing on Lake Saimaa. These fishermen made a joint proposal to the East Finland FLAG to develop and trial seal-safe pontoon trap-nets based on the Baltic Sea experience but adapted for inland conditions.

The FLAG's role was essentially one of animation. It brought together fishermen, conservationists and scientists, as well as securing funding from Axis 3 of the EFF, to develop and trial a trap-net where the opening is barred so that the target fish: perch, pike-perch and vendace (smaller than the salmon and white-fish targeted in the Baltic Sea) can swim in but the Saimaa ringed seals cannot. The Saimaa ringed seals are also smaller than the Baltic Sea Grey Seals. A coordinator was hired to organise the project and 6 commercial fishermen tested the trap-nets for over two years.



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Key lessons

- › **Relevance to FARNET themes:** Innovation, environment, culture and society
- › **Results:** The trials continue but the results of are already so encouraging that national fishing legislation is expected to change to allow the use of trap-nets in Saimaa again. This should reduce net fishing and the risks it causes to the seals while safeguarding fishermen's catch and consequent income. It also led to plans to build on these results through a €5 million LIFE-project, subsequently won by the Finnish Forest and Park Service and aimed at improving the conservation status of the Saimaa ringed seal. This will include further developing fishing selectivity and diversifying the species of fish captured in the area.
- › **Transferability:** The protected status of seals is a common issue for many fisheries around the Baltic Sea. As such, this project has a high transferability value for those areas that are still struggling to reconcile conservation demands with the economic viability of local fisheries businesses. This could mean simply adopting the technology itself or, as in this case, involving fishermen in adapting it to other contexts.
- › **Final Comment:** The project illustrates how fishermen can become protagonists in developing better business conditions while contributing to the conservation of a protected species which is ordinarily a threat to their activity. They have done this by participating in the innovation chain from the bottom-up.

Total cost and EFF contribution

Total project cost: €239 000

EFF Axis 3: €102 770 € (43%)

National co-financing: €136 230 (57%)

Axis 4: animation

Project information

Title: Development of seal-safe trap-nets in the Lake Saimaa area

Duration: 2011 – present

Case study date: April 2013

Project promoter

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[Video of a trap-net in action](#)

[East Finland FLAG factsheet](#)

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