

## Tanning of Fish Skin

**FLAG: Österbotten**

Ostrobothnia, Finland

### Project overview

Have you ever imagined wearing fish? This project proves that fish is not only a valuable food source but can also provide raw material for other more durable products, such as leather for clothing items. The project promotes the tanning and multiple use of fish skin through training, the sourcing of raw material, product design and marketing.



### Context and Key Challenges



Along the Finnish Ostrobothnian coastline of the Baltic Sea, fish skin is an unused resource and there is very little knowledge of how it can be exploited. The idea for a training project was inspired by a study trip to the Island of Gotland, on the South-East coast of Sweden, where the fish skin tanning tradition has been maintained.

The study trip was organised by the Österbotten FLAG, which operates along a stretch of 250 km on the west coast of Finland, from Karleby in the north to Kristinestad in the south. The area is made up of hundreds of islands and the fisheries sector is an important part of the local economy, providing around 310 full-time jobs. A key challenge for the area, however, is to maintain the viability of the fisheries sector and to attract young people to take up fishing as a career. The FLAG aims to preserve the rich cultural traditions that have been developed within the industry. The Tanning of Fish Skin project, which was proposed by the Fisher Women's branch of the Ostrobothnian Fisheries Association, is consistent with this goal. As the project focused mainly on training, the Korsholm Adult Education Center became the project promoter.

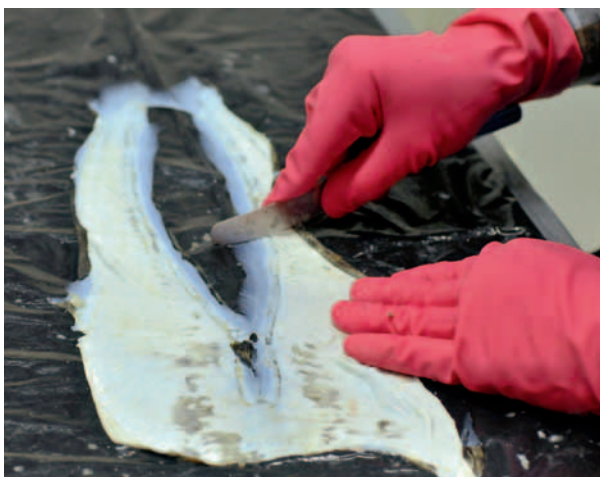
## Project objectives

The main objectives of the project were to:

- › Promote fish skin as a raw material, in order to attract the interest of the general public
- › Inform and train local fishermen in the handling of fish skin in order to safeguard the quality of the raw material
- › Organise the gathering of raw material and the purchase of the required processing tools
- › Train the fishermen in the tanning, sewing and development of fish skin products.

## Project description

The project was launched in the autumn of 2010 with a lecture by Swedish expert, Lotta Rahme, on fish skin tanning and processing. The event was attended by 37 people, including 30 women. The event also attracted considerable interest from the local and regional media: an article was published in the local newspaper and a radio interview was broadcast.



The next step was the practical training which was organised as evening courses: one on how to tan fish skin, taught by a local entrepreneur with experience in tanning, (12<sup>th</sup> – 30<sup>th</sup> January 2011) and another to teach participants how to sew fish skin leather into different products, given by the handicraft teacher of Korsholm Adult Education Center (11<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> February). Both courses were fully booked (13 participants in the first course and 14 in the second).

An exhibition to showcase the work of the participants was organised at the Centre's 2011 annual spring exhibition (see the Facebook link below) which hundreds of people attended. A fish skin tanner with her own company in the south of Finland was also invited to give a talk on tanning and offer demonstrations during the event. Before the exhibition another article was published in the local newspaper. Another exhibition, showcasing the work of Lotta Rahme, is planned for the autumn of 2011.

## Main actors involved

The project promoter was the Korsholm Adult Education Center. However, the idea behind the project initially came from the Ostrobothnian Fisheries Association, following a study visit to Gotland (Sweden) organised by the Österbotten FLAG. The FLAG played an important role in bringing together the various actors (Korsholm Adult Education Center; Ostrobothnian Fisheries Association; the Swedish Cultural Foundation in Finland, *Svenska kulturfonden*). The fisheries community was involved via the Fisher Women's branch of the Ostrobothnian Fisheries Association.



In terms of the participants on the course, these were very diverse and ranged from the unemployed to the retired as well as including a local net maker and handicraft entrepreneurs.

## Project outcomes

The project trained a total of 15 people and produced a manual for fishermen on how to handle fish skin in order to preserve the quality necessary for it to be used as a raw material for leather. It has also opened up a new area of business within the craft sector, providing an opportunity for the creation of new businesses and employment. Increased awareness of fish skin products and their multiple applications will help to ensure the success of this new sector.

While it is still too early to say how many people will eventually find employment or generate extra revenue from this activity, it is encouraging that a number of participants expressed interest in developing business ideas around it, including the production of fish skin items to sell, for example at Christmas markets and handi-craft fairs or alongside other product lines that established companies are already selling.

While the project has demonstrated that fishermen can generate some additional revenue by utilizing what was previously a by-product, the project has also benefited local artisans, who now have the possibility to work with and benefit from a new local raw material: leather from fish skin.

## Overcoming obstacles: key lessons

The greatest challenge for the project was the fact that fish skin is not well-known as a raw material in the leather industry, which meant there was a considerable need for promotion and awareness-raising. Another bottleneck was ensuring the continuous supply of the raw material.

An important lesson of the project was the fact that fish skin tanning is a multi-phase process, which takes time, and it may be more appropriate for craftsmen, rather than fishermen, to undertake this work in order to ensure a high-quality raw material.

The success of the project is largely attributed to the FLAG manager's ability to identify the opportunity during the visit to Gotland and his subsequent determination to promote the idea in his local fisheries area, building the necessary networks and "critical mass". The local media also helped by giving good publicity to the project while the course marketing by the Adult Education Center of Korsholm and the Fisher Women's network both helped to ensure good participation from the local community.



## Future prospects

A potential future issue for the project, and the promotion of the business model, is the lack of certainty around financing and further funding. Entrepreneurs interested in working with fish skin will need to make certain financial investments to further develop the concept.

However, the project has succeeded in initiating a network of artisans capable of tanning and processing fish skin – this network will definitely continue its activity even after the project funding ends. Some artisans will also continue to earn extra revenue from this work.

## Transferability

The project concept could be applied in other contexts, by applying the same approach and project setup. However, to scale up the project it is vital that, from the outset, there is a designated project group, with solid financial capabilities. To successfully transfer a project concept such as this, the acquisition of consultancy advice is also worth considering.

## Costs and funding

The total cost of the project was €28 280 which was broken down as follows:

Salary of project manager:	€15 280
Experts' training fees:	€3 900
Travel costs:	€2 900
Tools & materials:	€2 100
Hire of course venue:	€1 700
Communication and marketing:	€1 350
Miscellaneous:	€1 050

Axis 4 contribution: 81% (€22 907), of which 39% was from the EU, 42% from national co-financing and 9% from local municipal co-financing.

**Match-funding: 19%** 9% Korsholm Adult Education Center  
6.5% Svenska kulturfonden  
3.5% Ostrobothnian Fisheries Association

## Project information

**Title:** Tanning of Fish Skin

**Duration:** autumn 2010 – autumn 2011 (1 year)

**Case study date:** April 2011

### Project promoter

Korsholm Adult Education Center

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