



FREE FROM THE SEA

IN MY HOMETOWN OF SOUTH AFRICA, harvesting the bounty of the seas is a way of life many of us grew up with. In fact, *Free from the sea* is the title of a much-loved seafood cookbook cum identification guide by South Africa's own Delia, Lannice Snyman. First published in 1979, it's still going strong.

As a child, I spent summer holidays fishing in the estuary with my grandmother, collecting mussels from the rocks and digging for 'white mussels' (clams) on the beach, and in my early twenties, slurping sweet oysters picked at low tide by my now father-in-law. Crayfish and abalone collected by scuba-diving family friends appeared at barbecue gatherings. If you stuck to the rules and had a little patience, there was a rich variety of free seafood to be had. And of course, it all came with a generous helping of sunshine and sea air.

No doubt my deep love of the sea is rooted in these memories and the many coastal encounters my husband and I have had while exploring our adopted home, Scotland. On long beach walks we've nibbled sea buckthorn berries, poked around on the rocks and collected shellfish; with our little blue boat we've dabbled at putting out lobster pots and have had success fishing inshore for mackerel.

Yet for us there's so much more to learn, seek out and experiment

with in summers to come. If nothing else, gathering and catching sea-life for the pot is all about becoming part of the seascape – an intimate way of connecting with the ocean. Going home with something to cook adds to the simple pleasures of rock-pooling or taking to the water on a calm day, the shoreline uncurling all around.

"Foraging and fishing along the seashore is a pleasure, a joy and an education," agrees John Wright, author of the latest River Cottage handbook, *Edible Seashore*, published in May. "It's a meditative process – all your worries drop away – and fulfils a natural instinct, returning you to where you should be in the food chain."

Xa Milne, who with fellow Edinburgh mum Fiona Houston wrote the family foraging guidebook *Seaweed and Eat it*, believes: "Foraging is a wonderful way to get kids outdoors and away from the telly; connecting with

nature and taking an interest in food preparation. In the end, it doesn't matter if you don't find or catch very much – you won't be doing it for survival, but for fun."

SOMETHING FISHY

All fish lovers agree: the fresher, the better. The ultimate is hooking something yourself and popping it on the barbecue just hours later.

DISCOVERING AND HARVESTING THE RICH CULINARY PICKINGS ALONG SCOTLAND'S BREATHTAKINGLY VARIED COASTLINE MAKES FOR ENDLESSLY FASCINATING FAMILY FUN, WRITES IDA MASPERO



PHOTOGRAPHY: JOHN WRIGHT; RICHARD MASPERO

Though sea angling has a strong following, sitting out on the open ocean as swells rock the boat is not for everyone. So, if you're like me, target fish species you're likely to catch fairly easily in inshore waters.

Enter my favourite, the mackerel, probably the most underrated of fish. Cooked fresh, its deliciously firm, rich, oily flesh is perfectly complemented by the smoky flavours of the barbecue. From June to September, Scottish waters teem with mackerel, and they're fairly straightforward to fish for from a pier, or from a small boat or kayak.

A hand line or rod, rigged with multiple feathered or shiny mackerel lures, is gently jiggled up and down. Mackerel feed in big shoals – if you hook one, there's likely to be more about, so get that line out again as quickly as possible. Take time to admire the beautiful build and colouring of this species – sleek, torpedo-shaped bodies and smooth, scale-free skin marked with flashes of green, blue and silver.

Catching tasty crustaceans for the pot needn't be tough either. The shore crabs inhabiting popular stretches of Britain's coast probably spend half their summer in plastic buckets. Don't be too quick to tip them out again at the end of the day, for, as Wright assures me, they are surprisingly good eating: "Shore crabs make an excellent bisque, without the fiddle of picking the meat from the shells. After boiling, chop them roughly, shells and all, and simmer with a stock."

A crab line – the kind you buy at tackle shops and bucket-and-spade corner stores – is perfect for dangling from the rocks or a harbour wall. Bait it up with a bit of bacon or raw meat. Before boiling your crabs,

it is advisable to anaesthetise them by popping them in the freezer for an hour or so.

To stand a better chance of catching more sophisticated prey, a crab/lobster pot or creel is useful. No need to lug around a heavy, traditional-style creel, as there are a number of light, collapsible pots on the market. Attach a buoy or two (large milk bottles, in our case) with a sturdy line, bait it up with mackerel heads and guts (or any other fishy bits) and cast it off the rocks at low tide.

A small boat or kayak – ours is a compact inflatable with two horsepower outboard – gives more freedom. My husband swears by searching for a sandy clearing in the kelp forest to drop the pot in around low tide; remember to lay out enough line to accommodate the rising tide. Upon retrieving the pot at the next low tide, with luck it will contain brown crab, lobster or even the odd squat lobster.

On a sunny early-summer's day recently, we struck gold off the Fife shoreline. Together with a friend, we lifted the pot, set just three hours earlier, to find a haul of velvet swimming crabs, distinctive with their menacing red eyes and furry coating.

After measuring each crab and keeping only those that met the minimum landing size (MLS), we returned home with 14 or so, which we boiled and enjoyed as starters. Though much smaller than the better-known brown crabs, they are generously packed with wonderfully sweet flesh, all the easier to get to thanks to thinner shells.

It's easy to get carried away when lifting a pot crawling with crustaceans. But keep your catch only after careful consideration – measure them to check they meet MLS and ask yourself whether they will be cooked and eaten that same day. If there's a chance they'll go to waste, set them free.

After all, most of the enjoyment is simply in setting your pot and hauling it up. "The fun is in the anticipation of looking into your pot," says Wright. "Very often there's nothing, but for children it's so exciting." **D**

Pot luck: a decent-sized lobster is a prize catch (left); mackerel is abundant in Scottish waters in summer

◀ A SHELLFISH HABIT

Mussels, limpets and winkles are probably the most conspicuous edible sea-life along rocky shores, while the empty shells of razor clams, cockles and clams on a beach betray their hidden presence beneath sand or mud.

Mussels are a perennial favourite with seafood lovers. Though high-quality farmed mussels are for sale everywhere, there’s something special about collecting them yourself – they are fairly easy to find around our coast and straightforward to pick: just twist larger ones free from the cluster, then scrub and ‘de-beard’ them before cooking.

Many people shy away from collecting wild shellfish for fear of food poisoning. And it’s true, they do pose some risk. Bivalve molluscs – mussels, clams, razor clams, cockles and oysters among others – are filter feeders, so are prone to accumulating toxins and pollutants. However, when following a few basic safety tips – such as collecting in clean waters and avoiding the high summer months (see sidebar, Safe and kind collecting) – they are perfectly safe.

A few years ago, we visited Madeira and discovered *lapas*, a traditional starter of limpets cooked in garlic butter. What a revelation – limpets certainly aren’t rated good eating in this country. But since then, we’ve often gathered these common gastropods (marine snail relatives). They’re easy to find, and one swift kick from a hiking boot will usually dislodge them from the rock. Laid shell-side down on the barbecue grid and topped with a blob of butter and crushed garlic, they sizzle beautifully, the flesh coming away from the shell within a few minutes. Though a little tough for some, their flavour is pure ocean.

A quarry that requires considerably more dexterity and patience to bag is the sand-dwelling razor clam. I am yet to try my hand at it, but John Wright tells me that the unique stalking technique, which involves pouring salt onto the creature’s hole and quickly grabbing it as it emerges, turns razor clam hunting into high drama. “Razor clams are fascinating,” he says. “Catching them is both an art and a highly addictive challenge.” Apparently the end result is worth it: “They’re delicious and very sweet, delectable when barbecued.”

SEAWEEDS AND SHORE GREENS

While catching or collecting sea creatures for the table holds an obvious attraction for the male hunters of the household, foraging for seaweeds and shore plants is a little less messy yet just as much fun for the whole family.

The seashore is a place of plenty for the gatherer. Investigating rock pools at low tide reveals a colourful diversity of seaweed species. “There’s a modern prejudice against seaweed as food, yet it is part of Scottish tradition and culture,” says Milne. “In the past, crofters and fish-folk gathered dulse and other seaweeds.”

“Dulse is very meaty and great for vegetarians,” adds Houston. “We made it into a soup with potato. It grows on kelp and is the easiest to find once you know what it looks like. Like most seaweeds, dulse dries and keeps very well, and can become a real store cupboard staple.”

Most other seaweeds are not eaten as a vegetable, instead acting as thickeners in cooking. Carrageen is used to set milky puddings, while laver is the key ingredient in traditional Welsh laver bread (not bread at all, but a stodgy puree fried up for breakfast or used for making gravy). Kelp



SAFE AND KIND COLLECTING

Undertaken without care, seashore harvesting can be hazardous to your own health and the conservation of your quarry. Here are some tips to keep your foraging safe and responsible:

Be sure to identify species correctly and find out how to prepare them properly – arm yourself with a good guidebook or tag along with a seasoned forager.

Bone up on conservation status, EU minimum landing sizes, relevant byelaws and other restrictions to enjoy sustainable seafood.

Be aware of the tides and the weather – keep an eye on tide tables and inshore forecasts at www.bbc.co.uk/weather/coast.

Only take as much as you need for a meal. Besides, all wild seafood is best eaten on the same day, both for taste and food safety.

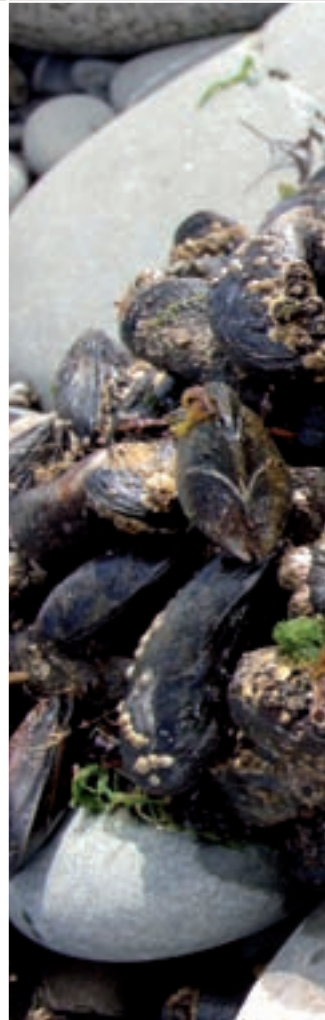
Pick and move on – for sea greens and seaweeds, cut a few leaves or fronds, leaving the plant intact.

When collecting seaweeds, shellfish and crustaceans, make sure you’re in clean waters away from storm water and sewage outlets; harvest from rocks covered daily by the tide.

For bivalves, it’s best to avoid months without an ‘r’ – this is when the creatures breed, and a build-up of potentially toxic bacteria is more likely in warm weather. Always cook them properly.

Clean all shellfish thoroughly in fresh water and check they’re still alive before cooking – bivalves should be closed.

If taking to the sea in a boat or kayak, wear buoyancy aids and sensible clothing, and carry safety gear for your vessel.





PHOTOGRAPHY: COLIN CAMPBELL; CHRIS WATT; WILLIAM MILLIKEN; IDA MASPERO



Bountiful seas (clockwise from top left): grilled razor clams; Xa Milne, Fiona Houston and kids forage on the Galloway coast; carrageen; sorting a haul of velvet swimming crabs; freshly-picked mussels.


can go into soups and stews as a thickener.

“Seaweeds are fascinating and really beautiful once you get into them,” Houston contends. “You’ll become obsessive about the timings of your beach walks to coincide with low tide. Incorporating seaweeds into your diet is an interesting adventure, but you cannot bulk up on them – eaten in large quantities, they are a purgative, so beware!”

As for harvesting, she stresses the importance of picking live, fresh seaweed rather than washed-up bits. Cut only a few fronds from each plant and leave the holdfast (root-like foot) and stipe (the stem) undamaged.

Meanwhile, above the high water mark, a variety of edible coastal flowering plants provide interesting taste sensations for adventurous foodies. “In trying different sea greens, like Scots lovage, alexanders, sea beet and orache, we were rediscovering some really unusual flavours,” says Houston. “Many of these would have been popular in the past as food or medicine, and several were cultivated. But these plants have been largely forgotten about.”

Very different are the bright orange berries of the sea buckthorn that have been used in Asian remedies and tonics for centuries; it is now enjoying attention as the latest super-food thanks to its potent punch of anti-oxidants, amino acids and plenty of vitamin C and E.

With these health-giving properties in mind, we’ve gingerly nibbled at the berries during winter walks along the East Lothian coast. Squishy and densely clustered on 

spiny branches, they are extremely tart with a strange, oily flavour, so not tempting to eat fresh by the handful.

However, given the abundance of this vigorous seaside shrub, considered invasive along parts of our coastline, it seems a shame not to do anything with it. Wright provides inspiration: "Sea buckthorn really excels in puddings and preserves. The best jam I ever made – and I make a lot of jam – is sea buckthorn and crab apple. It's breathtakingly tart."

Foraging for shore plants and seaweeds requires no special equipment and is fairly straightforward, provided you know what you're looking at. Pick with consideration – snip off only a few leaves or fronds, leaving the plant with its root intact – and spread your foraging rather than picking intensely in one area.

Sensible seashore foraging and fishing should not have any negative effects on the conservation of marine species. As Wright points out, individuals responsibly collecting for their own consumption are unlikely to have any damaging environmental impact. "People always say – what if everybody foraged? Would that not cause devastation? The truth is that it's not going to happen. And for most of those who do take it up, foraging will remain an occasional activity, a hobby."

What's more, its value in fostering appreciation of food and the environment, especially among children, is enormous. "If you're not a conservationist already, going foraging for your food will turn you into one," continues Wright. "It makes you realise how hard food really is to come by and how spoilt we are ... by foraging you come to value food much more."

Milne and Houston agree: "It opens your eyes – if you start looking around there's just so much wild food. It's very comforting to know we could feed ourselves in this way if we need to. But at the end of a day on the beach, it doesn't really matter if you haven't found much. Everyone's ended up a bit wet and had a great day out."

Wild pickings: sea buckthorn and crab apple jam (right); alexanders, a herb brought to Britain by the Romans, has its own unusual flavour (below right).

KEEPING IT LEGAL

When it comes to marine harvesting, the last thing any casual forager wants to do is fall foul of the law. Unfortunately, the legalities are a bit of a minefield. With so much regulation rightfully surrounding commercial fishing and harvesting, it can be hard to work out what applies to the forager collecting for personal use.

For most fish, shellfish and crustacean species, there are European Union minimum landing sizes (MLS), meaning that anything smaller cannot be kept and should be returned alive. MLS applies to recreational anglers and collectors, too. Legal sizes and catch restrictions may be found online and in the books listed in Backpack essentials.

Then, there is the issue of ownership and access rights. Generally, an ancient common law right exists to collect

crustaceans and shellfish for personal use, within reason. However, in Scotland, all mussels and native oysters are, strictly speaking, Crown property and may only be collected with Crown Estate permission. But it appears gathering mussels for personal consumption is tolerated.

A myriad local byelaws relating to seashore access and ownership complicate the picture further, though these are less common in Scotland than elsewhere in the UK. It's best to get the landowner's permission when collecting shore greens.

But, as John Wright wryly points out, the key is to act sensibly and take only what you need. "Inconspicuous harvesting is unlikely to attract attention; it's different if you're pushing a wheelbarrow. And, if anyone asks questions, pretend you're Norwegian. It works every time."



BACKPACK ESSENTIALS

The following books are more than just deckchair reading – they're inspiring and informative guides packed with practical information to help you identify, collect and prepare the wild bounty of our coasts:

RIVER COTTAGE HANDBOOK NO. 5: EDIBLE SEASHORE
by John Wright, Bloomsbury

This neat little hardback, recently published, is set to become the seashore foragers' bible. Full of recipes, humorous tales and personal observations from one of Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall's right-hand men. To order a signed copy of the book at a special price of £8.99 + p&p, visit www.rivercottage.net

SEAWEED AND EAT IT
by Fiona Houston and Xa Milne, Virgin Books

Again, chock-full of practicalities and tasty recipe ideas. Alongside the identification info and commonsense collecting tips, diary entries from the authors chart their families' discovery of the joys of foraging.

FOOD FOR FREE
by Richard Mabey, Collins/Collins Gem

This seminal forager's handbook, first published in 1972, also covers seaweeds and shellfish. The pocket-sized Gem edition makes a perfect backpack companion.



PHOTOGRAPHY: JOHN WRIGHT