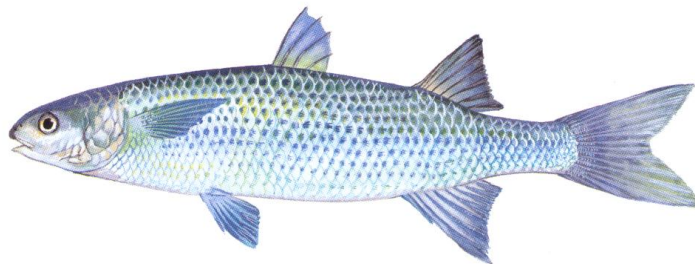


## Stop Net Fishing for Mullet

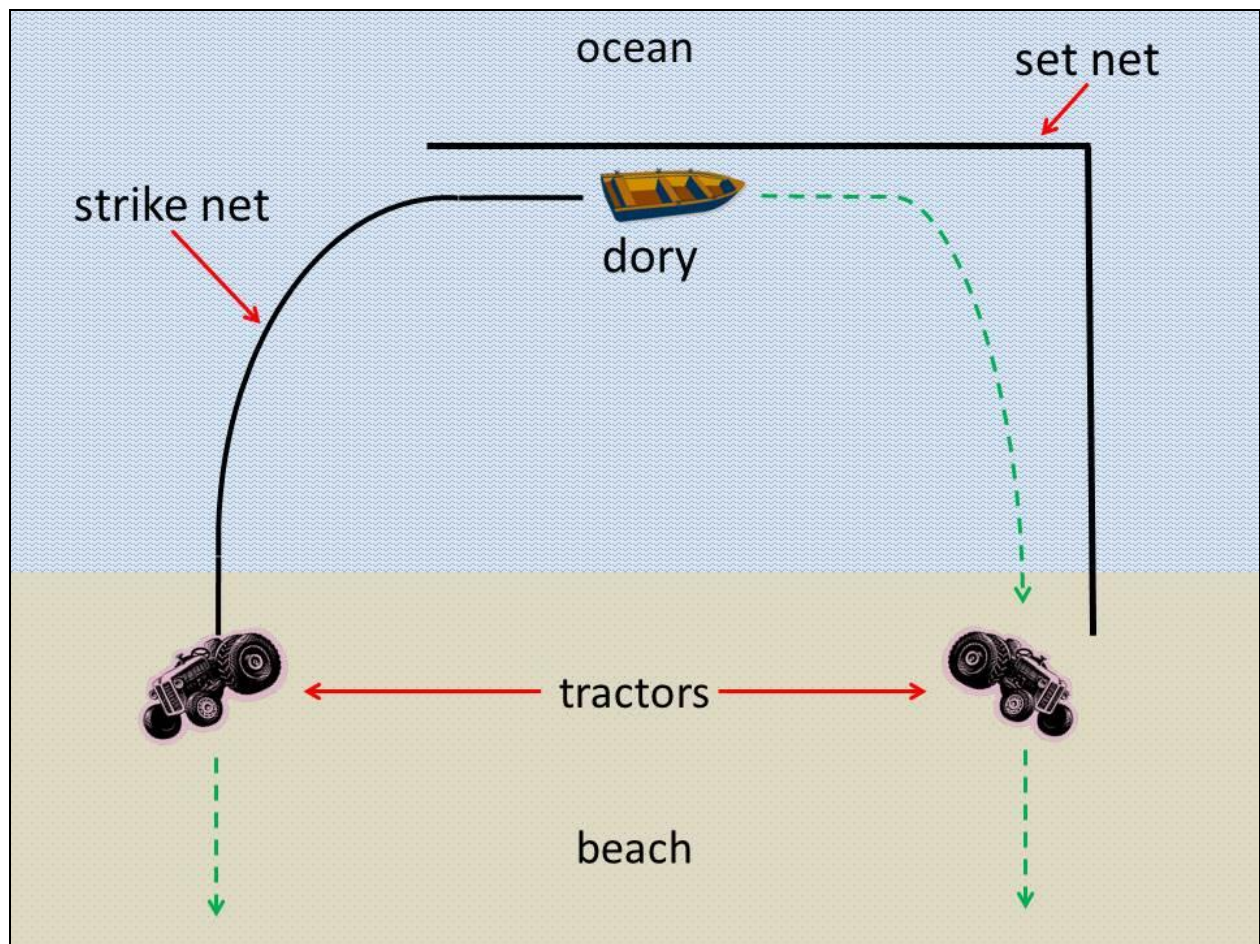
In the fall, with a shift in the wind and a significant drop in the temperature, known locally as a “mullet blow,” some Bogue Bankers still feel an instinctive urge to carry on their forefathers’ tradition of fishing for mullet off the beaches of North Carolina’s Outer Banks. This rite of the autumn season has continued for generations. Many members of the Frost Fishing Crew on Bogue Banks learned the techniques and lore of mullet fishing from their fathers, uncles and grandfathers. As one modern day fisherman recollected: “I was 15 or 16 years old when I started doing this. In early fall, they would get some of the ‘young bucks,’ as they called us, and they would teach us to row the dory.”



The intended catch for this type of fishing operation is the striped or jumping mullet, *Mugil cephalus*. Both the flesh and roe are sold either fresh or salted. Common ways to serve the fish are fried, broiled or smoked.

The techniques of fishing for mullet have not changed much since the early days, only some labor-saving equipment has been added. Today, instead of rowing the dory out with the nets and pulling them in by hand, crews use motors on the dories and tractors to help haul in the nets. The fishermen, using a set net

(sometimes also referred to as a “stop net”) limited by regulations to a total length of 450 yards, stretch it straight out from the beach then turn eastward and run parallel to the beach. This set net forms a pocket which, hopefully, will corral the schools of mullet as they leave the inlets and swim along the banks on their autumn spawning run to the sea.



In this depiction of a stop net set up the strike net is being payed out by the dory. Once it reaches the second tractor on the right the strike net will be hauled up the beach acting as a large seine. Any fish that were corralled in the set net will be pulled onto the beach. Diagram by Benjamin Wunderly.

Uncounted hours are spent watching the waters in the pocket formed by the set net. Even the inexperienced eye can see the mullet launch themselves out of the water and then fall back to the surface with a “splat!” But the experienced eye can also observe the fish just below the surface. The seasoned fisherman notices the ripple in the water at the edge of the set net and knows the mullet have reached the net and are swimming up toward the surface – searching for a way around this obstacle.



A crew of stop net fishermen keep a watchful eye on the water. Image from the North Carolina Division of Marine Fisheries.

While waiting for the mullet to arrive, the fishermen are relaxed, sharing stories and jokes. They lean on their trucks or sit in the cabs if the weather is windy or cold. Once a school is sighted, the fishermen quickly don their rubber suits and launch a net-laden dory into the surf. With one end of the strike net anchored to a tractor, the net is payed out toward the open end of the set net, closing the third side of the pocket. The dory turns westward and circles the mullet school trapped inside the pocket. A quick run to shore brings the end of the strike net to a second tractor where the heavy line is hooked up. Now both tractors begin to pull in the net as the fish are forced into a smaller and smaller crescent of net.



The stop net has been “struck” and strike net hooked up to the second tractor. Now both tractors will pull in the strike net. Once the net is close enough to shore fishermen will get in the water and help bring in the haul of fish. Image from the North Carolina Division of Marine Fisheries.

True to their name, the “jumping mullet” try to escape the net by jumping up and over it. It takes talent and dexterity to secure the bottom of the net, the lead line, on the sand to keep the mullet from swimming under it while at the same time hold the top of the net to prevent the mullet from jumping over it. Once ashore, the fish are transferred to waiting pick-up trucks and transported to the local dealer.



The catch has been hauled onto the beach and is now being transferred to waiting trucks. The fish will be delivered to local markets in the same day. Image from the North Carolina Division of Marine Fisheries.

But the tradition of mullet fishing on Bogue Banks is about more than just the techniques and the equipment used to successfully bring the fish ashore. In the early times, fishermen set up camps on the beach. Often the wives would knit the

nets, clean the fish and cook. Whole families would participate; skills were passed easily, casually from generation to generation. Today this quest is not so intense. Fishermen return to their homes for at least part of the evening. Whole families are not involved in the fishing activities. Still, the mullet season continues to offer an opportunity to ignore clocks and calendars and switch to a different kind of time. As in the past, schedules are determined not by the hours on the clock but by factors such as the tide, the wind, the temperature and, of course, the mullet. Dawn and sunset, especially if the tide is high, are often good times for pulling the nets. Ironically, the best fishing is frequently in bad weather.



An early depiction of a typical fishing camp on Shackleford Banks. *The Fisheries and Fishery Industries of the United States*, George Brown Goode, ed., Washington, D.C.: The United States Commission of Fish and Fisheries, 1884-87.

The camaraderie is still evident as the fishermen tease each other good naturedly (mostly), but today there is an awareness that this is an endangered tradition. Fishing regulations, fish population, human population and prices for the fish are all factors in the fisherman's determination of whether or not he can continue the tradition of his forefathers.

The text of this document was prepared for the opening reception of a temporary exhibit at the North Carolina Maritime Museum in Beaufort sometime in the late 1990's. The exhibit consisted of a variety of photographs taken by Diane Hardy of Morehead City, North Carolina during the fall of 1995. Diane documented the work of the Frost Fishing Crew of Salter Path as they worked their stop nets for mullet on Bogue Banks. The imagery was added in 2014 to enhance the story of this traditional fishery that as of Fall 2013 was still in operation, even though Diane Hardy quoted the fishermen, "Take your pictures now because we're probably going to be the last generation to do this!" at the time of her work.

