

Mézières-en-Brenne October 2009

## Harvesting fish from the ponds at La Touché

*A trip report by Tom Eves*

### Overview of the site

Mézières-en-Brenne, is located within the the Parc Naturel Régional de la Brenne. A 'parc naturel régional' has a comparable designation to National Parks in the UK. The area covers 160,000ha and over 1400 manmade fishing ponds called étangs.



Some of the many ponds in the region

The ponds in the region were constructed to provide a reliable source of protein from fish miles from the sea. They also provided a means of making the most of the land that has little nutritional value for arable crops and requires very low density stocking of grazing animals due to the poor grassing value of the prairie grasses.

The ponds are all filled by rainwater and so as to ensure that there is always enough water when the ponds are drained for harvesting/inspecting the fish or emptied to reduce the levels of disease by allowing them to remain dry for a whole year. When they are drained the custodians of the pond will always drain the lowest pond first and work their way up hill (though the local gradient change is limited).

These ponds have a long tradition of use in fish-farming, with over 2000 metric tons of fish harvested produced each year. The predominate species is carp (*Cyprinus carpio*) making 65% of the harvest. The remaining catch is made up of Roach (*Rutilus rutilus*), pike (*Esox lucius*) and tench (*Tinca tinca*). The majority of the carp is exported to Eastern Europe and some put in selected ponds for anglers' from the UK to attempt to catch, the remaining species are consumed locally or used to restock other ponds.



A pond that has been drained and fished and left to dry out

### La Touché étang/pond

The pond is a large rectangular body of water that is connected to a series of other ponds via sluice gates. There is limited management of the land surrounding the pond. Access between the ponds is via track roads built on top of the dyke banks surrounding the water body.



An example of a sluice gate, showing the stop logs and channel

On one of our first days working in the region we were tasked with clearing the access to La Touché pond. The track to the pond had become overgrown with the regeneration of ash and willow and though access on foot was perfectly possible to get in the vehicles needed for the harvest would be difficult. The scrubby re-growth was cut off as close to the ground as possible without leaving a point using bow

saws and loppers, it was essential to leave a flat surface in case they were driven over, as it was not the best of locations to be dealing with a flat tire.

## The fishing

Fishing the ponds can take place any time between October and March; this is to allow the maximum chance of refill from precipitation and to reduce the chance of missing the breeding season.

Over a period of days the water is slowly released into a drain and either used in a lower pond or allowed to drain away into the local watercourse. The water is allowed to fall slowly to ensure that all the fish are collected in the deepest part of the pond, close to the sluice gate and not left high and dry in the mud away from the collection area. The sluice is a simple construction that has not changed over the years there is a ratchet system used to lift the sluice boards and hold them above the flow.



The seine net in use

Once the water level has fallen to a depth where the fish are congregated into a small area and it's possible to work in chest waders the fishing begins.

The fish are collected by seine netting, a traditional method that requires a lot of helpers. A seine net is a net that hangs vertically like a fence in the water and is dragged in place by hand, the net is cast out in a circle and thanks to the weighted bottom of the net keeps all the fish in place. Smaller hand nets are then used to collect the fish, which are then sorted into species and placed in fish boxes. These boxes float but have a perforated base so that when they need to be moved, it is only the weight of fish and not water to be moved as this quickly drains away. On the way to the moving vehicle they are weighed to allow the fish merchant to be billed accordingly.



Weighing a box full of pike

The van used to move the fish is modified to host a series of tanks of water that are aerated to compensate for the high stocking densities during the move. Fish that have no economic value are left in the pond and any alien species caught are killed and placed on the bank for the wild boar (*Sus scrofa*) to eat. The alien fish species found in the pond was sun perch (*Lepomis macrochirus*) these were dispatched by a blow to the head and left to be scavenged.



A view of the van used to move the fish, from above and from the side.

After we had left the fishermen to continue harvesting it was latter reported to us they had found a number of the rare European freshwater tortoise (*Emys orbicularis*) in the remaining water

The catch



pike (*Esox lucius*)



Roach (*Rutilus rutilus*)



Tench (*Tinca tinca*).



sun perch (*Lepomis macrochirus*)

The European Conservation Action Network was established in 2007 by The Kingcombe Trust, a charity based at The Kingcombe Centre in west Dorset, dedicated to conservation and environmental education (Reg. Charity no. 1054758), in association with the Dorset Branch of Butterfly Conservation. The project is funded through the Leonardo da Vinci section of the European Union Lifelong Learning Programme and has partners in France, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Belgium, Poland and Romania. Further information can be obtained from [www.kingcombecentre.org.uk](http://www.kingcombecentre.org.uk) or from Nigel Spring (tel: +447981776767. Email: [nigelspring@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:nigelspring@yahoo.co.uk)).