

Angus Campbell

Angus Campbell has been fishing the waters off the coast of The Isle of Harris since he was fifteen years old. A self-made businessman and entrepreneur, Angus began fishing for herring using drift nets before moving on to pots and creel fishing, acquiring larger vessels with the profits from his successes at sea. In 2005, he established the Kilda Cruises Company, providing guided trips to the remote island of St Kilda, some fifty miles off the coast of Harris. Though the island was evacuated in nineteen thirty, it remains a Dual World Heritage Site and a place of unique historic and cultural significance, attracting hundreds of tourists each year.

Last September, Angus and his two crewmen made history by catching the first Atlantic Bluefin tuna by rod and line in Scottish waters, fifty miles out of Leverburgh on the edge of the continental shelf. The fish, which weighed a massive 515lbs and measured nine feet in length, fought both crewmen for an hour before it was finally hauled aboard, having swallowed the hook in the process of being reeled in.

The achievement, which signifies a landmark in Scottish sea angling, will also open up potential benefits for both tourism and marine research in the Outer Hebrides. I meet with Angus to discuss the details of the catch itself, and its future implications for visiting sea anglers drawn by the prospect of being able to fish for this incredible species in Scottish waters for the very first time.

We are inside the Kilda Cruises office in Tarbert. Maps and charts are on the walls, and spread across the length of the tables at the back of the room are the two rods used in the hunt, each with a reel containing 600 metres of the 200lb fishing line required to bring in the tuna, which can swim at speeds of up to 40 miles per hour. Angus unzips a bag and shows me the rigs used in the catch, which consist of several squid-shaped lures and hooks suspended from a solid titanium bar, which, as Angus points out, has been bent completely out of shape.

‘That happened as we were trying to bring the second one aboard,’ he says with a smile. ‘As you can see, it’s impossible to straighten this out again, the material is too strong, but it’ll make for a good souvenir. We had to source all this equipment, including the rods, the reels and the lures, from a specialist in the United States. He came over and showed us how to set everything up on the boat, and he had some useful information. This is the same equipment they use for catching marlin, yellow fin and sword fish in other parts of the world.’

I want to know more about the process involved in the lead up to the catch itself, and how Angus and his crew were able to locate the fish. Having spent most of his life on and off the sea, I’m curious to know if Angus had ever encountered tuna before.

‘In all the years I was fishing I never came across them,’ he says. ‘It’s only been in the last few years that we’ve heard reports and sightings of them in these waters.’

One of the popular theories for the sudden appearance of Atlantic Bluefin tuna near the Outer Hebrides is a rise in sea temperatures around the globe. As part of the effort to locate and capture the fish, Angus teamed up with James Morrison from the University of the Highlands and Islands College in Stornoway.

'Aside from helping on the boat and with the catch, James was also taking sea temperature readings while we were out; we'll continue to take readings so that we can measure and determine just how much the temperature of the sea is changing over the next few years,' Angus tells me.

In addition to new rods, reels and thermometers, Angus's lead vessel for the St Kilda trips, the Orca III, was also fitted with a video camera in order to capture any images of tuna near the boat.

'The first few days we were out we didn't see anything,' Angus says. 'Then on the second attempt we managed to film one of them. Because they move so fast coming out of the water, it's almost impossible to take an individual photograph of them, but with the video camera we were able to capture an image, and so we knew then that they were in the area.'

Over the next few weeks Angus would continue to go out in search of the tuna, sometimes taking local business owners with him to demonstrate the possibilities for corporate fishing events or tuna fishing tours for visitors to the island. In order for that to happen though, Angus and his crew would need to catch one, to demonstrate that it was possible.

'One day we were out and we had our first proper sighting of them. We were around fifty miles out of Leverburgh, when we saw the Bluefin fishing for sprats and herring, and so we knew to return to that location the next time.'

The day of the catch, the Orca III left Leverburgh on a calm, flat day with a light easterly wind.

'The weather that day was fine. You have to have calm weather for tuna fishing because we were towing the lures for the tuna at the stern of the vessel, and if the sea is rough they just get tangled up. We were about an hour out to sea, South West of the Uists, when we got two bites on the lures within almost ten seconds of each other.'

Angus tells me that the excitement on board was electric:

'It was a great feeling, especially because we had been out to sea for several weeks with barely a sighting of them, and so to have not only one fish bite, but two in such a short space of time, was tremendous.'

However, the double catch meant that Angus and his crew would have to change tactics if they were to reel in the fish:

'We were towing the lures in order to attract the tuna. If it had just been one fish I would have followed it with the boat so that it couldn't drag out as much of the line, but here I had to bring the vessel to a halt, as the two tuna were pulling in different directions.'

Twice the catch also meant twice the work for Angus, Chris Gunn and James Morrison, who had to reel in the tuna by hand.

'We were exhausted by the end of it,' Angus says. 'The first tuna we reckoned weighed about 300 lbs, but we let that one go. The second one had taken 500 metres of line off the reel, so you can imagine trying to bring in a fish like that along half a kilometre of line wasn't exactly easy,' he chuckles.

Taking it in turns, in a struggle with the fish that would last over an hour, the trio were finally able to haul the tuna aboard, once it had become clear that it had swallowed the hook.

‘The rod was bent double, and on top of that the titanium bar of the rig connected to the lures damaged beyond repair.’

Besides the physical exhaustion and the damage to their equipment, I’m curious to know if Angus and his crew had any idea of the sheer size of the catch.

‘Even when we had that one on board we still didn’t realise it was as big as it was,’ Angus says. ‘We reckoned it was about 300lbs looking at it; the meat in a tuna is very dense, it’s just like a solid lump of fish, so we about 200lbs out in our estimation, really. They’re a lot heavier than they look.’

Once back in Leverburgh, the triumphant team hauled the fish onto the pier and gutted it, searching the stomach contents to see what it had been feeding on. It is currently illegal to sell Bluefin tuna in Scotland, and so the fish was cut into steaks and distributed as gifts to family members and friends on the island, with a 900 gram steak being taken to Ross Brown, the owner of Lov-Sushi, in Glasgow, where it was used to prepare the first tuna sushi dish using Scottish tuna.

‘Ross is an excellent Sushi chef, and so we went down to Glasgow with the steak so that he could show us how to prepare the dish. It was delicious,’ he smiles.

As for what this means for the future, Angus has already received bookings for the first tuna fishing tours, which will start in September through to October 2014.

‘September is the time when the sea temperatures here reach their peak, and that’s when the tuna start to make an appearance,’ Angus explains. ‘I think it will give a boost to the fishing tourism industry here; there are a lot of people who are very interested in catching a big fish, and as you say this is the biggest fish ever caught on rod and line in Scotland, so it’s quite exciting for anglers who are really into their deep-sea fishing and who previously have had to go abroad to catch this type of fish. So being able to catch it on our own doorstep is an exciting prospect.’

‘The other good thing is that the tuna fishing tours will come in right at the end of our Kilda Cruises season, so it will extend our season by another couple of months, which will also benefit the local hotels and other aspects of the tourist industry in Harris.’

While the overwhelming response to the historic achievement has been positive, there are some conservationists and environmentalist who have criticised the catch of what is still considered to be an endangered species of fish. To this, Angus replies:

‘We work and will be working on a catch and release basis. We learned quite a few lessons with the last trip to do with the type of gear we were using; we’ll only be using these lures now where you can get the hook out or even leave the hook in without causing any damage to the fish. The hooks are quite large and these new ones will simply rust away, whereas previously we were using stainless steel ones. This way we can leave the hook in and simply cut the line and the fish is free and will get rid of the hook in a few weeks.’

'We've invested in other types of equipment including a grapple that allows you to take the tuna by the lip and remove the hook without harming the fish. This also means that gaffs for holding the fish steady alongside the boat won't be used so often and only when necessary.'

Angus and his crew will also be working closely with Marine Scotland in the coming years to fit each of the tuna they catch in the future with a satellite tag, so that experts will be able to track the fish and gain a knowledge of what parts of the world's oceans they are coming from, as well as an understanding of their numbers and the general sea stock.

For many people on the Isle of Harris, this landmark catch will serve as both a reminder of the island's proud fishing heritage, and as a cause for celebration that the same principles of innovation, perseverance and skill are being carried forwards into the future.