

A couple of champions!

In recognition of their dedication to the fisheries, Marja and Bert Bekendam receive the title ‘Professional Fisher of the Year’ in The Netherlands

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In 2007, the Association of Professional Inland and Inshore Fishers of The Netherlands (CvB) instituted the title ‘Professional Fisher of the Year’ to shine a spotlight on professional fishermen who play a vitally important role for the sustainable future of the fisheries sector and are an example for others. Then, as the important role of women in the sector became more visible. Some years back, the Association began to nominate for the title husband-and-wife couple, who were seen as the true champions of traditional inland fisheries in The Netherlands.

The Netherlands is a deltaic country where some of Europe’s largest rivers flow into the sea. It has a wide system of rivers, fresh water lakes, polders, channels, ditches and enclosed salt water inshore waters. The inland fishers are part of the landscape. Professional inland fisheries in The Netherlands are traditionally household-based enterprises where family members work together, usually husband and wife or father and son or daughter. It is an old

artisanal profession. Some families have been fishing for centuries in the same waters and have built up a fund of local ecological knowledge and sustainable management practices over generations. Many process their fish catch at home and sell directly to the consumer. Unfortunately, there has been a fast decline in the number of inland fishing enterprises—from around 3000 in 1945 to just about 150 today. Government policies have not protected the sector, which is struggling to survive.

This year, the title ‘Professional Fisher of the Year’ went to the couple Marja and Bert Bekendam, bringing much needed public attention the lives of professional inland fishers and the issues they face. It highlighted, as the association hoped it would, that good cooperation between husband and wife is of great importance for the future of the sector. Marja and Bert Bekendam received this title for being true ambassadors of the traditional inland fisheries, who continue to follow their profession despite being hit hard by dioxin pollution in their fishing waters as well as a government fishing ban that forced them to downsize considerably.

Bert Bekendam is a fourth generation professional inland fisher. He has been active in the local Fishery Management Council and actively participated in the making of a

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Bert and Marja Bekendam on a fishing trip.

regional fishing plan in collaboration with the region's recreational anglers. While he provides all the data on his own catches for the fishing plan, he also points the recreational anglers to their responsibilities. He welcomes anyone who wants an overview of his fishing practices, and willingly describes his fishing and fish stock management methods. Together with his wife Marja, Bert Bekendam has regularly received Members of the Parliament and representatives of the national organization of recreational fishers, patiently answering all their critical questions.

Marja Bekendam is a major driving force behind the couples' inland fishing enterprise. She collaborates well with the board of the Association of Professional Inland and Inshore Fishers of The Netherlands. She has been part of a delegation that met with the European Commission and members of the Fisheries Committee of the European

Parliament, bringing the issues of traditional inland fisheries to the attention of the European policy makers. She is a core member of the Associations' Working Group on the Promotion of Inland Fisheries and Freshwater Fish. Apart from this, Marja is also the president of AKTEA—the European Network of Women in Fisheries—and holds regular presentations for organizations throughout the country, particularly women's organizations, on the traditional inland fisheries of The Netherlands and on women's role in fisheries.

Says Marja: "Our struggle is never over but until now we have survived. Fishing is no longer what it used to be but we have confidence that it will become better again. And although my husband does not fish every day of the week any more, nor every week of the month, and indeed, not even every month of the year, he is still a fisherman and I am still a fisherman's wife!" ❧