



Pole and line tuna fishing in the Maldives



Steve Coomber meets **Angela Fitzpatrick** to find out why she was compelled to co-found ethical company the Reel Fish Co.

Canned tuna's Reel deal

In 2008, Greenpeace published a report titled *Tinned Tuna's Hidden Catch*. It contained some unpalatable facts about one of the UK's favourite seafoods. Most of the canned tuna sold in the UK, out of the 770m tins annual total, was caught by highly intensive purse seine fishing, combined with fish aggregation devices (FADs). It is a method of fishing that not only catches and kills a high proportion of non-targeted

species globally - enough to fill the equivalent of nearly one billion tins of tuna annually - but is driving commercial tuna stocks to extinction.

Today, largely thanks to the Greenpeace campaign, most UK retailers are committed to selling sustainably caught tuna. One small business, though, has always been ahead of the shoal. The Reel Fish Co., co-founded in 2009 by Warwick MBA

alumna Angela Fitzpatrick, launched its Reel Tuna range in 2011 – a branded, 100 per cent pole and line sustainably caught canned tuna range.

Many of Fitzpatrick's entrepreneurial skills can be traced back to her postgraduate degree. The Warwick MBA changed her life, she says. After a first degree in Latin and English, and 15 years working sales in blue chip companies, Fitzpatrick wanted a broader perspective on business. "I wanted to know about operations management, management accounting, marketing," she says. "An appreciation of how it all fitted together."

Studying for a three year Executive MBA at Warwick, she soon gained an insight into all aspects of running a business. Many of her assignments focused on her employers, Heinz. So, for example, as part of operations she looked at a new product Heinz was bringing to market, and the challenges faced by the people involved with the product's launch. Or when she was studying financial accounting, Heinz was introducing Activity Based Costing at the same time.

After her second year, Fitzpatrick took a study break for family reasons. Not long afterwards she moved companies, first to Wrigleys, then to John West Foods in 2006, where she worked as sales controller. It was while she was at John West that Fitzpatrick began to think about the sustainability issues associated with commercial fishing.

"We were really successful as company during that phase. We were routinely asked for a sustainable option," says Fitzpatrick. Although she raised the issue of doing a pole and line caught canned tuna product, she was unable to make any progress.

Reading the *End of the Line* by Charles Clover convinced her that it was time for a change. "It is a seminal piece of work which tells you that if people continue to fish without limits, then there won't be any left," she says. "When I read the book, I suddenly thought, 'I cannot do this anymore. I can't behave in a way that precipitates a situation that leads to the extinction of a species'. I'd already reached that position in my head, so that is why it was easier to make the move. I knew that there was an alternative out there. A better way to do things."

The idea for the new business came over a bowl of moules et frites in Chester, with work colleague Bryn Scadeng. If both the chilled and fresh versions of tuna were being delivered sustainably, why not canned tuna? As Fitzpatrick notes, canned tuna is an everyday purchase with 90 per cent household penetration, there should not be a different approach to sustainability just because it is in a tin.

Poles apart

And so, in 2009, The Reel Fish Company was born. "Morally I couldn't sit there and perpetuate the situation, I wanted to

make a change. I knew that the climate was right and consumers were also starting to see this – that made it accessible as a business model," she says. "Bryn and I thought, 'right we can do this, it is going to take a lot of work, but let's go and see what we can do'."

It was always going to be a tough task. The two canned fish giants Princes and John West had about a third of the market each. Add in the supermarket's own label brands, and there was not much of a competitive ocean to swim in. But Fitzpatrick had an angle she thought would work.

At the time, the majority of canned tuna on sale in the UK was caught with industrial purse seine net fishing. These are nets, often a mile long, drawn around the schools of tuna, closed beneath and tightened like a drawstring purse. They were usually used in combination with FADs, which fish congregate around, making it easier to trap them in the nets. This is intensive fishing on a giant scale. It is simply not sustainable over the long term. It depletes the ocean of tuna. And it also has a huge bycatch of non-targeted ocean species such as turtles and sharks.

Fitzpatrick wanted Reel Fish to offer one of the first branded, environmentally friendly, all caught canned pole and line tuna product ranges in the UK. Pole fishing, as the name suggests, is simply fishermen on a boat catching tuna with a pole, line and barbless hook. To get the tuna feeding, water is sprayed on the ocean, or baitfish thrown out. Then the tuna are hooked and lifted onto the boat, one by one. Bycatch, minimal.

Without securing a supply of tuna there was no business, so Scadeng and Fitzpatrick travelled to the Maldives to source the principal ingredient in their product range.

"You can get pole and line caught tuna from various parts of the world. But the reason we chose the Maldives is because they do not allow any purse seiners into their waters. So we knew that we had total traceability," says Fitzpatrick. "Plus it is a coastal state model, and you are putting the money back into the economy. We pay a portion

of the money up-front to the factory, they know we're committed to the supply chain and the goods. So these people are not just selling the raw material around the world for other people to process and add the value."

It took a year of relationship building and negotiation to convince the Maldivians to supply Reel Fish. Once the raw materials were sourced though, it was time to start planning the product launch in earnest.

In the early days of the business, Fitzpatrick's MBA know-how (she completed the MBA in 2008) proved invaluable. Whether it was business plan writing, holding her own in technical conversations about financing, using tools like Porter's five forces, or devising a product differentiation strategy, Fitzpatrick drew extensively on her MBA knowledge.



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Reel Fish Co. founders Bryn Scadeng and Angela Fitzpatrick

Before launching the new product in the supermarkets, Fitzpatrick had approached Asda and involved them in the creation of the product. It was a robust process with the buyer at Asda challenging Fitzpatrick on the rigour of Reel Fish's sustainability policy. Engaging with retailers in this way ensured that Reel Fish had a stronger product when it finally launched in an Asda store in Wakefield, on July 10, 2011.

A sustainable future

It was great timing. Greenpeace had drawn attention to the sustainability issues around tuna fishing and its retail in the UK in 2008 with its report *Tinned Tuna's Hidden Catch*. Public awareness about the issues involved had grown considerably, yet the major brands were still only making limited progress towards supplying a sustainable product in the stores. Indeed, as of October 2012, Greenpeace reported that although now navigating in the right direction, Princes and John West still had some way to go to meet their commitment to switch to 100 per cent FAD-free and pole and line canned tuna by 2014 and 2016, respectively.

Launching its "reel taste" "never from nets" range of solely pole and line caught canned tuna in 2011, The Reel Fish Co. was ahead of the curve in providing a branded sustainable canned tuna product. Other stores soon followed Asda's lead stocking Reel Tuna. "After that we got into the Co-op, Waitrose in September, Tesco in November, Sainsbury's in January 2012, Morrisons in April 2012 and then Ocado, August 2012," says

Fitzpatrick. "So we covered all of the major grocers, as we would define it. Now we are talking to retailers in Holland and the Republic of Ireland."

Reel Fish is already selling some four million cans of sustainably caught tuna a year, and expanding. There is talk of moving into added value tuna – tuna with other products, such as pasta, for example. And when the company has got its Reel Tuna model exactly the way it wants it, Fitzpatrick would like to offer other fish, such as salmon, for example.

Canned tuna is a highly competitive market in the UK, and Reel Tuna is always likely to be under pressure on price and have a smaller market share than its main competitors. Yet although Princes, John West and the supermarket own labels have moved, or are moving towards, more sustainable tinned tuna products, Reel Tuna has the advantage of being a brand that showed the way, and is very strongly associated with ethical fishing methods and sustainably sourced fish.

"In a market that's worth £250m, each one per cent is worth £2.5m to our business. If we chip away at that, it becomes a lot of market share our competitors must try and recover. And those big players have to spend an awful lot of money even to move share," says Fitzpatrick.

"I think that we've had a degree of success because we have driven behaviour change in our competitors. But, being the size we are, it just means that if we want to swim with sharks we have to be even better at what we do and even clearer about what we stand for – the most responsible method for catching the fish, and great taste and quality." ■