Eels and Reeds

Careful getting in now. Step into the middle – it'll rock less that way. You ever been in a boat like this before? There's not much rudder to speak of, that's why it feels a bit unstable. Means it can go in properly shallow water, though. Look, even if you did fall in here, it'd only come up to your knees. I imagine you don't want to get those shoes wet though, eh? Yeah, I thought they looked fancy. Sit over there, that way I won't accidentally splash you when I move the pole around.

It's a good day for it, you know. This sort of thin cloud – keeps the sun off you. But no wind to make you cold. Means you hear more, too, when the air is still. If you listen closely while we go along, you might hear a bittern booming – we'll pass a spot where you can hear them often. Hardly ever see them, though. But the noise is impressive.

Yes, my family have fished eels for generations, as far back as records go. Except my dad, of course, he was an estate agent. And grandad was an accountant. But they would've fished eels, if there had been any eels around back then. Funny isn't it, to think – what we see around us now is more like what my great-great-great grandad would've seen growing up, than what my dad saw? We've come full circle, in a way.

I must've been a teenager when they stopped pumping the water away. I don't really remember it, I guess I didn't realise the significance at the time. But I do remember what was here before then – fields and fields of crops, as far as the eye could see. But the soil was like dust, stuff only grew if they poured gallons of fertiliser on, and that messed up all the waterways something proper. All the ditches full of algae, all the fish suffocated. And when the wind picked up – I remember once, as a lad, I was walking to the next village over to meet a friend, and when I arrived one half of me, straight down the middle, was covered in thick dust. The wind had blown it all off the field next to the road. They would lose inches of soil at a time in a strong gale.

So the people from the government and the environmental groups came along, they proposed this grand plan of 'carbon sequestration'. Honestly, I didn't really know what that meant. Still don't fully get it. Something to do with the fenland pulling carbon dioxide out of the air and storing it in the peat. But then they started going on about the rest of it, the fishing returning and all that, and our ears pricked up more then. Everyone was fed up with farming, that was for sure. No money in it once the subsidies began drying up.

Yeah, sea level rise is another one they talked about. We hadn't really thought about that, being so far from the sea and all – but everywhere is very flat round here, lots of it below sea level, actually. Home insurance had been going up for years, which had made us all a bit jumpy, like the insurers knew something we didn't. No good for my dad's business, either, nobody wanting to buy round here. It seemed a bit – what's the word? – counter-intuitive that switching the pumps off and flooding the place would protect us, but I suppose it makes sense, in a way. Spreads the water out, doesn't it?

Look, we're coming up to the first of my traps now. See that dot on the GPS there? I don't really need this machine, I've been doing this for so long now I could find the traps with my eyes shut, but the cooperative says I have to. Belt and braces, I suppose, in case my memory starts going or something. I wouldn't want the traps to be forgotten and the poor eels just starve down there. What a waste that'd be.

Alright, here we are. Give me a hand with this rope, will you? Yeah, it's a bit slimy, you can put those gloves on if you like. Careful not to splash your tablet. It's waterproof? Blimey, technology never stops, does it. I had one of them a bit like that when I was in school, spilt a glass of juice on it and it never worked again.

Looks like this one's empty. But I can show you how it works – see there's like a funnel at one end? So the eel swims in to get the bait in the main chamber, then it can't find its way out again. Not the smartest of creatures, but still beautiful in their own way, I say. Okay, let's put it back.

Changes were gradual at first. People were worried they'd given up their farmland and would get nothing in return. The government had promised to keep payments coming in until the fishing picked up, but there wasn't much trust in governments back then. Plus, all these hardworking folk didn't like not having anything to do. Some became guides, showing tourists around the place. Lots of birdwatching types visiting – you still get plenty of them around, you can spot them by the gigantic cameras they carry. Actually, I'm surprised we haven't bumped into any other boats, yet. Still, with the reeds so high this time of year we can't see so far.

The other new thing we had to deal with was collective ownership. The government basically let us sort this out ourselves – they sent a couple of women who were experts in coordinating this sort of thing, but otherwise, it was down to us. At first we thought we'd just keep separate land ownership – or fen ownership, if you will, not so much land anymore, is it? The farmers had got used to boundaries, space to call their own and fence off from everyone else. Been that way for hundreds of years. But nobody quite knew what the land would look like once the pumps had stopped, which bits would become good for fishing, which would be rubbish. So we decided to pool it all together, share the benefits out equally.

I like it, all of us being in it together. It's brought us closer together as a community, that's for sure. More trusting, more open, that sort of thing. Plus, it gives us a certain safety net, you know? If all my traps are empty for a week, I know it won't matter, as long as someone else has had a good haul. I'll still get my payment. And I'm not going to cheat – that GPS shows where I've gone, too, checks I've done the work I say I have! All felt a bit insulting at first, and invasive too, but it's not so bad when you know it's only your mate looking at your route. Only the cooperative can get the data. The government and all these big businesses are kept well out of it, thankfully.

I can see you look sceptical. It's not a perfect system, not by any means. There are plenty of squabbles, accusations of people not pulling their weight, all that sort of thing. But it's mostly just old rivalries. The newer generation, who have only never known this system, they take to it like ducks to water. Speaking of ducks, see that little flock up ahead? They're pochard. The males are the ones with the russet-coloured heads. Lovely little creatures.

Okay, second trap here. Also empty! That's a crying shame. Seems we're off to a bad start. Still, a lot of it's luck, more than anything. Enough pots and enough people, you can guarantee someone will have something. And we're not catching too many, before you ask. We have the scientists down here every month, asking us how many we've caught, where we've caught them, all of that. They go out on their own surveys too, all sorts of fancy gadgets on their vessel. And they say the eel populations are only growing. Makes sense – everything seems to be growing round here! More birds, more fish, even more types of reed. Many times I find water plants I've never seen in my life, and then the next year I see them everywhere I go. I love it, seeing a place grow richer like that.

See this spot here, where my pole only goes down a foot or so? This used to be the road from my village to the nearest town. When I was young it was like a promontory, raised high above

the fields, because they'd lost so much soil to the wind. Now it's only a little higher than the mud either side – see, my pole is touching the bottom here. All this mud has built up since it was flooded. Building the soil again. And capturing all that carbon, too – better than trees, that's what the scientists tell us. Underwater mud doesn't ever burn, after all.

Yeah, I do enjoy my work. Not every day, of course. If it's pouring with rain, it's no fun at all. But it feels like home – like I've returned home. I heard this story once that there are these butterflies that go on this long migration, and there's one point on their journey where they make a big diversion for no reason. Well, scientists worked out it's because there used to be a mountain in the way, millions of years ago. And somehow the butterflies still remember. Makes you think that DNA must hold some sort of ancestral memory – that's what I feel, anyway. I feel connected to this place, like it connects me to my ancestors. Like it's where my genes feel at home. Maybe that sounds stupid. You can leave that bit out of your article.

I only work three days a week on this job, usually. Yeah, I also work one day a week as a DJ, just for a bit of extra cash. Two days in the winter. Does that surprise you? What, just because we're out in the sticks, we don't have parties? To be honest most of my gigs are in the cities, but the trains don't take long at all. It's nice to have some time off the water. All that punting does make my back hurt sometimes, so a break can – hey, did you hear that? That was the bittern. Let's be quiet for a moment. There – there it was again. You heard it? Amazing, isn't it? Reminds me of when I turn the bass up on my decks. Don't laugh!

Alright, here's the third trap, fingers crossed! Aha, that's more like it. What a beauty! Must weigh almost four kilos. I'm just going to slide my knife in – you look away for a moment. It's the quickest way, I promise. There, all done. Wow, what a specimen. Tell you what, we can keep this one for ourselves. My partner and I'll cook it up when we get back, there'll be plenty for you too. You don't look keen. Not tried it before? Well, there's a first time for everything – we can make an eel lover of you yet. Everyone can change for the better, that's what I always say.