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Horseback shrimp fishing fades in Belgium

By Emma Davis

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OOSTDUINKERKE, Belgium — As dying trades go, Belgium's horseback shrimp fishery must be among the most arcane and outdated.

Men in bright yellow overalls and slickers ride their plodding workhorses across the sands into the North Sea at low tide, trawling for shrimps in just the way that their forefathers have done for more than 500 years.

There are now fewer than a dozen left of the hundreds who once plied the trade all around the North Sea - in France, the Netherlands and Britain.

Just as in 1500, the horses drag two large planks behind them that open out once in the water to reveal a net that scoops up the shrimps and any other fish in the surf.

Then, it was coastal farmers who wanted the fish to use as fertilizer for their fields. Now those farms have been crowded out by far more lucrative seaside property development, and the horses have to be stabled inland.

"There are no farms any more," said Eddy d'Hulster, who has fished the shore at Oostduinkerke for decades. "It's just all buildings and tourists."

The catch is now more likely to end up on a plate than a field, but prices are nowhere near enough to turn a profit. Instead, Oostduinkerke's tourist board supports the last outpost of the tradition because of the tourists it attracts.

"We are as a commune very proud of our fishermen," said Christiane Moncarey from the tourist board. "We try to help them in any way we can. There are still men who like this type of horse and fishing. It's a passion for them."

Hordes of children and adults clamor for the shrimps as they are brought ashore.

The men throw a few pailfuls onto the beach for the children to gather up, then take the rest of the catch home to cook.

"Each fisherman has his own recipe to cook his shrimps," said d'Hulster. "Normally, shrimps are cooked in sea water but the horseback fisherman uses fresh water.

He adds salt and also a little something more.

"It's a secret of the fisherman. They all think they have the tastiest shrimps - but they are liars because mine are the most tasty."