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## **FACTSHEET H                      SUPERSTITIONS AMONG FISHERFOLK**

Perhaps because of the hazards of their occupation or their mutual reliance, fishing communities developed their own unique customs and folklore. They were tight-knit and conservative and their names, food and mode of life were different from the surrounding population. Even between different fishing villages there was often rivalry and it was rare for them to marry outwith their own community.

Because of the dangerous nature of their work, they were unusually superstitious. Thus there were words considered as very unlucky e.g. to mention the word minister was never done - he was called the man in the black coat, the words rabbit, salmon (red fish), rat (lang tail), pig (curly tail), and salt were amongst the most forbidden words. Should the men encounter a hare, a dog, or a person with red hair they were likely to refuse to put to sea and, if a rabbit, hare, dove, or pigeon were found on board they would most certainly not set out. The antidote to bad-luck words was to touch cauld iron.

Other customs were associated with sailing or fishing itself. At Nairn it was unlucky to shoot nets on the port side, to taste food before the first fish was caught or not to take blood from the first fish. In some places fights were started so that blood could be shed before the fleet went to sea. Some boats were thought unlucky in themselves. One way of avoiding bad luck was never to row against the sun (anti-clockwise) when leaving harbour.

Rituals and charms were thought to influence the weather. It was believed that a wind could be whistled up or that it could be untied from special knots in a piece of rope – one knot would give a breeze, the second a gale and the third a storm. A change of weather was always expected on a Friday.

In some areas, other days of the week had special significance, being either lucky or unlucky. Most communities did not fish on a Sunday for example, although it was considered a lucky day. Work begun on a Saturday was thought to take seven more Saturdays to complete while jobs started on Mondays would be finished quickly.

There were initiation customs before a lad could become a fisherman and, even today, customs and superstitions influence aspects of a fisherman's life. Echoes of the old ways are still found in the villages today.