

39.—THE FISHERIES OF THE VIRGINIA COAST.

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Regarding the fisheries of the Chesapeake Bay and the Atlantic coast of Virginia, the question of greatest importance to our fishermen is the appalling decline in the number of the free migratory fishes that annually visit the waters of our State. Years ago, as late even as 1860, with the simplest contrivances for their capture, it was impossible to utilize all the fish caught. The markets of Baltimore, Norfolk, and Richmond were abundantly supplied by the fishermen of these respective localities. The only devices for the capture of fish up to that time and for several years after were the haul seine and gill net. With the advent of railroads and the employment of ice, more distant markets were reached, with the consequent demand for a larger supply of fish. To meet this growing demand the fish pound was ingeniously devised, and for several years thereafter but little effect upon the apparently inexhaustible resources of the sea was to be observed, notwithstanding the fact that the pound nets, weirs, etc., multiplied with marvelous rapidity.

There were 162 fish pounds in the Chesapeake Bay and its tributaries in 1880, 412 in 1883, and 550 in 1888. In 1880 the estimated value of fish caught was \$906,068; in 1883, \$1,258,576; in 1888, \$1,265,000; in 1893 (estimated), \$725,000, three-fourths of which were shad. In 1885 the tide of an abundant catch reached its highest flood, since which time, fluctuating year by year, the fortunes of the fishermen have rapidly ebbed away, until to-day, in a large majority of cases, it is a losing venture to engage in this industry. Our fishermen are finding their occupation gone, an occupation that gave employment to 25,000 people and added largely to the taxable values of the State.

Is the fish pound responsible for this sad condition of affairs? There is such close connection between the introduction and multiplication of this all-devouring fish pound and the continually decreasing run of our pelagic fishes as to be at least suggestive. Nothing in the shape of a fish that ever enters it comes forth again alive. Large and small, old and young, the barren and the gravid fish—all are sacrificed to the blind cupidity of their pursuers.

If we assume that the pound-net fishing continuing from the middle of February to the first of October, and which it is almost a physical impossibility for fish to escape, running the gauntlet from the mouth of the Chesapeake Bay to the fresh waters of all its great rivers—if we assume that this is to be charged with the dire condition of our

fisheries, what steps can we recommend as an abatement to this standing menace to the sad remnant of a once grand industry? Many of our people would be thrown out of employment and much capital now invested in the pound nets would be sacrificed if the pound nets were to be abolished. Nor could one State alone repair the damage, already too long continued, without the hearty coöperation by legislation of all the Atlantic States—concurrent legislation. The efforts of the fish-culturists will be barren of good results without this heroic treatment as supplementary to artificial propagation, and a close period during their spawning season and perfect freedom to reach their natural spawning grounds.

It is to the serious consideration of this matter that I would call the attention of gentlemen here to-day.