

THE RELATIONS BETWEEN STATE FISH COMMISSIONS AND COMMERCIAL FISHERMEN.

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It must be obvious to every person engaged or interested in the work of fish-culture that the relations between the mass of the commercial fishermen and the State fish commissions are not as cordial as they should be. In fact, to put it plainly, in many places these relations are strained to such a point as to practically amount to open antagonism on the part of the former against the latter. It is also undeniable that there is a large class of citizens—some of whom can not be regarded in many respects as unprogressive—openly opposed or indifferent to the work of the fish commissions, and some even go the length of actively opposing the enactment and enforcement of stringent laws for the protection of fish. This antagonism is so potent as often to exercise a sinister influence on legislation.

In many States it is difficult and often impossible to secure the passage of efficient fish-protective laws, while measures to legalize the employment of the most destructive devices for taking fish find numerous supporters and comparatively easy passage. Few States grant liberal appropriations for fish-cultural work, and I know of none that grant as much as could be profitably expended. In Pennsylvania the last legislature adjourned without making any appropriation at all; and in Michigan, where fish-cultural work is carried on with exceptional effectiveness, if I have been correctly informed, the last legislature cut the usual appropriation in half. These are not encouraging signs for the future of fish-cultural work, and it behooves those interested to find out the cause of the trouble and remedy it if they can.

It has been less than thirty years since the establishment of fish commissions, but in that time they have returned to the people many hundredfold the moneys which they have expended. They have in countless instances prevented the extinction of valuable food-fishes and have successfully introduced others equally valuable; they have in many cases largely increased the supply and made fishing waters profitable that were for years before financially unprofitable. But these things seem to weigh very little with the mass of the commercial fishermen and those who demand the right to catch fish when, how, and where they please.

By the united action of New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania, all destructive devices were torn from the Delaware River at an expense of some \$5,000, and through heavy stocking on the part of the United States and the Pennsylvania fish commissions, the shad industry of that stream was brought from a value of between \$60,000 and \$80,000 to nearly \$500,000 at the nets every year—a consumers' value of more than \$1,500,000. This magnificent result is well known throughout Pennsylvania; yet it did not prevent the commercial and semi-commercial fishermen in other parts of the

State from introducing and carrying through both branches of the legislature a section of an act which permitted the use of fish-baskets, and which act was only prevented from becoming a law through Governor Hastings interposing a veto. The situation in Pennsylvania is practically the situation in most of the States where the fresh-water fisheries are or should be large.

The path of fish commissions is not strewn with roses. On the contrary, it is beset with difficulties calculated to discourage the most ardent. An investigation of the causes which produce the strained relations between the commissions and the fishing interests reveals so many that to remove them all seems almost a hopeless task; nor is the apparent hopelessness of the task materially lessened by the conviction that many of the complaints against the methods of the commissions are trivial, and that in other cases the complainants are utterly in the wrong. I believe there would be a better prospect for an earlier settlement of the troubles were it not for the undoubted fact that the relations between the sportsman angler, and the commercial fisherman are anything but harmonious. Each seems to regard his interests as paramount to those of the others. Little consideration is shown by each for the other. One charges the other with trying to ruin his business or pastime. In the controversy the commissions suffer; and as long as the bickering continues, the work of fish-culture must be hampered. This lack of harmony is greatly to be deplored, because both the commercial and sporting fishermen confer huge benefits on the States. The financial returns of the commercial fishermen are more readily reckoned than those of the sportsmen, because more direct; but should those of the latter be fairly gathered and tabulated, the total would be startling. There are many counties in a number of the States where trout, bass, or other game fishing is considered good, in which the people, outside the towns and large villages thereof, owe the chief means of their livelihood to the visiting sportsmen.

Putting aside the question as to which brings in the greatest financial returns in the course of the year, it may be stated with positiveness that both interests are essential to the good of the State. It is the duty of fish commissions to guard and further both, and I believe that as a rule they perform it to the best of their ability; unfortunately, however, in the performance of this duty to its fullest extent, as they see it, they are often apt to give apparent cause for grievance on the part of commercial fishermen that the sporting interests are guarded at the expense of theirs. For example, in Pennsylvania the commercial fishermen complain that they are practically debarred from the unrestricted catching of certain of the commoner food-fishes, like the eel and sucker, through the severity of the laws formulated at the instance of and enforced by the fish commission. In effect the laws in question forbid, under heavy penalty, the use of any device whatever for the catching of fish, other than rod, hook, and line, in any of the waters of the State except Lake Erie and the Susquehanna and Delaware rivers. In Lake Erie pound and other nets may be used under certain restrictions; and in the two streams named, seine and gill nets of a prescribed mesh may be used during certain months, provided the latter be not fastened in any manner; in other words, they must float with the tide or current. By this it will be seen that fyke, dip, cast, and, in fact, all other forms of nets, including fish-baskets, are prohibited.

There is not the slightest doubt that a strict enforcement of this law, or the faithful compliance with it on the part of the fishermen, together with the heavy and

persistent artificial hatching and planting of fish, would result beneficially to the fishing interests, both sporting and commercial. The results in the Delaware River prove this beyond the possibility of dispute. This being the case, other things being equal, there is no question of the propriety of forbidding the use of any device which will in any manner tend to depopulate the streams. Fish like the shad, herring, and striped bass are of far greater consequence than eels and suckers. Unfortunately, "other things" are not equal. The element that exclaims against the severity of the laws and demands the right to employ devices to catch eels, suckers, and commoner food-fishes, is strong enough in Pennsylvania and in other States to check the efficiency of the fish commissions and in some instances to shape vicious legislation.

After some years' thought on the subject and as a result of investigating the demands of the commercial fishing interests and of personal struggles to secure the passage through the Pennsylvania legislatures of efficient fish-protective laws or the defeat of bad ones, I have about come to the conclusion that true fish protective work, as advocated and attempted to be carried on by fish commissions, is in advance of the times. If I am correct in this assumption, it then becomes not out of place to consider whether or not it is expedient to yield something to the present demands of the commercial fishermen, even though by so doing their interests are not truly served, and wait for time and education to bring about a better state of affairs. I am inclined to believe that the commissions can accomplish more in the long run if they adopt this course. The pulling of the commercial fishermen one way and the fish commissions another is not calculated to advance the cause of fish-culture.

I think Professor Baird advanced the idea that it is better to so increase the supply of fishes by artificial propagation that protective laws should not be necessary; that it is cheaper to make fish so abundant that the fisheries need not be restricted than to spend large sums of money in preventing people from fishing. Theoretically, this is an ideal proposition, but, unfortunately, under existing conditions it does not and can not work. If State legislatures would appropriate money enough to carry on the work of artificial fish propagation to an extent eight or ten times what is now done the experiment might be worth trying, but anyone who has attempted to get a moderate appropriation through the legislature knows how hopeless such an effort is. The tendency of those who control legislatures is rather to interject politics into the commission than to assist them to advance the cause of fish-culture. Under these circumstances it is necessary to have fish protective laws; but to what extent in order to produce the best present results for fish-culture?

It may be considered heresy to surrender any part of a principle for the sake of expediency, but when fighting for a great object it seems to me that the greatest advances are made by adopting a give-and-take policy, to gain and retain the regard and respect of the other side, and to take what can be got from time to time with a feeling that it is a step toward the final objective point. As matters now are, I can not see that the fish commissions have advanced much, if any, in popular estimation in the last four or five years. On the contrary, it appears, in some States at least, that they have had as much as they could do to hold their own. In Pennsylvania, as I have already noted, the legislature adjourned without making any appropriation for fish-cultural work during the next two years; and out of the popular subscriptions, amounting to some \$15,000, which have been made to supply this neglect or oversight, only \$1,000 came from the commercial fishery interests, and that from Lake Erie. In

Michigan the annual appropriation was cut down one-half, and in West Virginia the office of fish commissioner was abolished entirely. Under such conditions it seems not only the part of wisdom but of necessity to make some concessions.

I believe the time will come when commercial fishermen generally will recognize the injury to their interests by the use of overdestructive devices, whether they be fish-baskets, pound nets, salmon wheels, or their allies, and that the fish commissions are working for and not against them; but such conditions do not exist now, and it is the present aspect which must be faced.

I believe that certain devices prohibited by law in many States, such as set or out lines, fyke nets, dip nets, and even set nets, while they ought not to be used, would not, under certain restrictions, materially injure the work of fish-culture. I believe that fish-baskets are the most destructive device in existence for taking fish, with the possible exception of explosives. Under no circumstances should they be permitted in streams into which shad come to spawn, and nowhere else ought they to be allowed without being guarded by severe restrictions or without a license being first paid therefor.

But, above all things, it is important that the commissions and the commercial fishermen come to a better understanding; that they work more in harmony for the advancement of fish-culture. It is also essential that the sporting element and the commercial fishermen cease their jealousies and suspicions of one another and, each recognizing that the other forms an important link in the State's welfare, join hands in hearty support of State fish commissions and their work.

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