

NOTES ON THE FLORIDA SPONGE FISHERY IN 1899.

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The sponge fishery of Florida between January 1 and December 31, 1899, presented a number of important features. In view of the great interest which has recently been manifested in this branch of our fisheries, and in order to bring up to date the published records of the industry, the following notes are published. The statistics for 1899, together with other information for that year, have been furnished by Mr. John K. Cheney, of Tarpon Springs, Florida, a leading buyer and packer of Florida sponges.

Key West and Tarpon Springs are now the only ports at which the cargoes of sponges are discharged and sold. At the former place in 1899 there were eight purchasing firms and at the latter six, two firms being represented at both places.

Key West is the headquarters of a large fleet of vessels and boats employed in sponging about the Keys and on the grounds off the west side of Florida, and is the exclusive market for the sponges taken on the southern and eastern coasts, although receiving a good proportion of the crop from the grounds to the northward.

Tarpon Springs is very conveniently located in the proximity of the important grounds off Rock Island and Anclote Keys, from which the largest quantity and best quality of sheepswool sponges come; and the prominence of the place as a sponge center has been increasing from year to year. In a report on the fisheries of Florida transmitted to Congress by the U. S. Commissioner of Fish and Fisheries in January, 1897, it was stated:

The sponge industry of Tarpon Springs (or Anclote) is more extensive than that of any other place on the Florida coast except Key West. The recent increase in the business has been noteworthy, and it seems probable that the favorable position of the place with reference to the sponge-grounds will result in a still further development of the industry, which will make Tarpon Springs a formidable rival of Key West.

In 1895 the value of the sponges purchased at Tarpon Springs was only \$60,000, or less than 15 per cent of the total value of the sponge crop of that year, while in 1899 the Tarpon Springs trade amounted to over \$230,000, or more than 60 per cent of the aggregate value of the output.

The 1899 crop of sheepswool sponges on the Rock Island grounds was very large, exceeding the output of any season for quite a number of years. The sponges were, furthermore, of unusually large size. The explanation of the large catch is that clear water prevailed for a long time in localities where for several years the operations had been curtailed by turbid water and where, as a consequence, the sponges had been permitted to grow and multiply with little molestation. On the "spring trip" to these grounds many sponges weighing 2 to 3 pounds each were taken, and it is reported that

8,000 pounds were secured weighing from half a pound to 1 pound. At least half the catch on that trip consisted of sponges that weighed more than a quarter of a pound. These figures are significant in view of the fact that of late years the average weight of sheepswool sponges brought in has been only 1 or 1½ ounces. During the remaining part of the year the weights were the average for recent seasons. The total sheepswool crop was 153,700 pounds, of which 27,000 pounds were from the grounds about the Florida reefs.

Another feature disclosed by the data for 1899 is the greatly reduced catch of grass sponges, especially on the grounds off Anclote Keys, as compared with 1897. In the last-named year nearly 100,000 pounds of this cheap grade were landed from these grounds, but in 1899 less than 60,000 pounds were brought in.

The yield of yellow sponges was comparatively large and in excess of that of recent years, the grounds in the Gulf of Mexico and about the Keys producing about the same quantity, although in quality the Key sponges are better. The other sponges (boat, glove, etc.) were in about the usual quantity.

The financial outcome of the fishery in 1899 was very gratifying, being the largest in four years, although the aggregate quantity of sponges taken was less than in 1897. The prices at which the sponges sold were unusually high. It is said that as a rule the fishermen received better prices than ever before, and that there was an advance of fully 25 per cent over the previous year.

It is reported that throughout the year the sponge market was good, and that the demand was urgent and in excess of the supply. A considerable part of the catch of sheepswool sponges too large for toilet and other domestic purposes was disposed of to the ordnance departments of the United States and British armies and navies, for use in cleaning guns.

Following is a summary of the approximate quantity and value of the sponges of various kinds taken from the different grounds in 1899:

Kinds of sponge.	Pounds.	Value.	Average price per pound.
Rock Island sheepswool.....	126,700	\$278,300	\$2.20
Key sheepswool.....	27,000	54,000	2.00
Rock Island and Anclote yellow.....	28,000	7,205	.25
Key yellow.....	27,000	9,000	.30
Rock Island and Anclote grass.....	59,400	11,819	.20
Key grass.....	17,500	2,500	.15
Boat or velvet.....	8,000	4,000	.50
Glove.....	10,000	1,000	.10
Total.....	304,400	387,914	1.21

The following comparative statistics of the Florida sponge catch show, for four years, the quantities of the different kinds purchased from the sponge fishermen and the prices paid:

Kinds.	1895.		1896.		1897.		1899.	
	Pounds.	Value.	Pounds.	Value.	Pounds.	Value.	Pounds.	Value.
Sheepswool.....	231,272	\$363,107	149,724	\$248,196	157,476	\$240,599	\$153,700	\$332,300
Yellow.....	29,509	11,798	23,655	9,318	32,362	13,082	55,800	16,205
Grass.....	21,387	5,464	44,617	11,508	128,622	29,188	76,900	14,310
Other.....	23,052	6,502	18,315	3,990	18,066	3,171	18,000	5,000
Total.....	306,120	386,871	236,311	273,012	331,546	286,040	304,400	367,914

