

Smelt
(*Osmerus mordax*)

Smelt have been a popular food fish on the North American continent for hundreds of years. Captain John Smith reported, on one of his explorations of the New England area in 1622, that the smelt were so abundant that local Indians scooped them out of the water in baskets. Among early Pacific slope Indians, fish were extremely important as food and used as one of the chief items of trade. Pacific Indians enjoyed smelt as a food and also utilized one particularly oily variety by drying the fish and burning it as a candle. Today, smelt are still considered one of the finest food fishes. Smelt takes its name from the ancient Anglo-Saxon word "smoelt" meaning smooth and shining. Local names for smelt include icefish, frostfish, and candlelight fish.

Description

Smelt resemble midget salmon in appearance and they are distantly related to the salmon family. The smelt is a small, slender, silvery fish with olive green coloring along the back. The average size of smelt varies from 7 to 8 inches, occasionally up to 14 inches. The average weight is from 10 to 11 smelt to the pound and up to $\frac{1}{2}$ pound each for some of the larger ones. Smelt have a large mouth for their size and the lower jaw projects beyond the upper. The tip of the tongue has large, fang-like teeth which, with the large

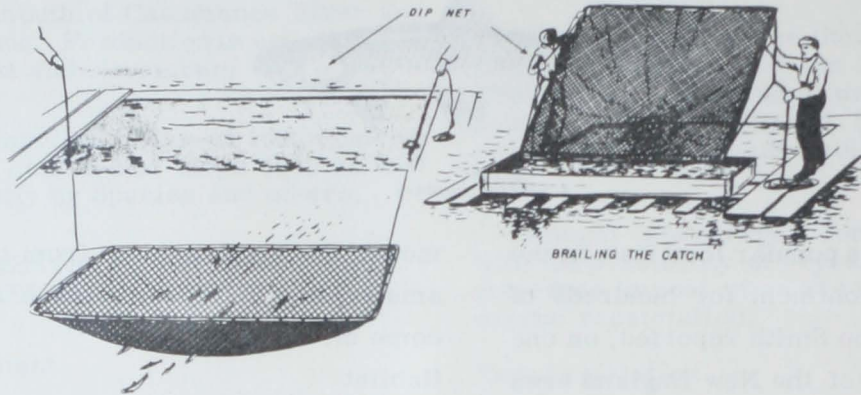
mouth, distinguish smelt from other similar small fish. Smelt have large scales which come off readily.

Habitat

Originally anadromous, like their relatives that live in the ocean and ascend rivers and streams to spawn, smelt have adapted to fresh-water habitats, living in cold-water lakes and streams in many parts of the United States. The Columbia River with its tributaries in the West, the Gulf of St. Lawrence to the Virginia Capes in the East, and the Great Lakes area in the Midwest are all smelt country. Smelt were first introduced into the Great Lakes area in 1906, primarily to provide food for salmon which were being planted in Michigan lakes. The salmon transplantation failed, at that time, while that of the smelt succeeded beyond the wildest expectations of those who carried out the project. It is believed that all of the smelt now found in the Great Lakes came from the eggs taken from Green Lake, Maine, in 1906 and planted in Crystal Lake, Michigan.

Smelt Fishing

In the early part of the year when the ice begins to break, the smelt, traveling mostly after dark, leave the large lakes and rivers and swarm into tributaries on their spring-time spawning runs. This is the signal for



hundreds of men, women, and children who splash through the icy shallows to catch the tasty little fish. Their fishing gear varies from nets and buckets to window screens and an occasional bird cage. Anything that can be used to scoop the smelt out of the water is used. The silvery bodies of the smelt darken the waters making them easy prey for sport and commercial fishermen alike. Various types of gear are used by commercial fishermen but the most popular are the pound nets, gill nets, and a modification of the shrimp trawl. In some areas of the United States, smelt are harvested by commercial fishermen throughout most of the year.

Conservation

Most conservation methods which concern smelt are carried out at state levels. Regu-

lations have been set up as to type of gear that may be used as well as the amount of smelt that can be taken. Scientists are seeking answers to fluctuations of smelt abundance as well as why the fishery has declined in some areas. The life histories and spawning habits of smelt are also being studied.

Uses of Smelt

Smelt have delicate, sweet flavor and contain a pleasant oil that aids digestion. Many gourmets consider them one of the choicest of fish. Smelt may be broiled, pan-fried, or deep-fat fried. In some areas, smelt are baked or prepared in a casserole. They are available either fresh or frozen all year round. (National Marketing Services Office, NMFS, NOAA, U.S. Dept. of Commerce, 100 E. Ohio St., Rm. 526, Chicago, Ill. 60611.)