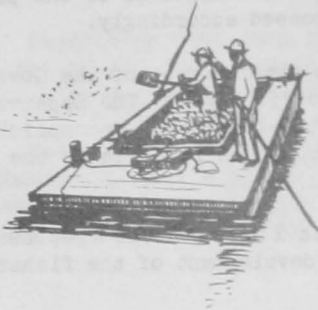


SECTIONAL REVIEWS

Chesapeake

TRENDS AND CONDITIONS: The oyster situation in Maryland has been quite variable this winter, according to the Service's Fishery Marketing Specialist making the commercial fishery survey in that State. In general, production has been good. The largest catches up till mid-December were being made in the Wicomico River, where oysters are said to grow so thickly they do not shape up properly. These oysters, known as "cats-tongues," are not preferred by the trade because they have thin shells which are easily broken and are difficult to shuck. Generally from the Patuxent River on across the Bay to the Choptank River and down to the Virginia line, oysters have been excellent. North of that area, they have been relatively poor.



One of the most recent innovations in oyster-policing in Maryland is reconnaissance by plane, which has proved quite successful. On one flight made in December, six boats were detected using illegal scrapes and dredges. When brought to trial, all operators were found guilty.

The depletion of the Chesapeake's oyster bars by unrestricted dredging is a serious matter. Such depletion was noticed as far back as the Civil War. Reports published during 1872 state that during the war, the waters were thrown open to everyone who would pay the military officials for a permit to oyster. The consequence was that the oyster beds were scraped bare. In 1880, another report states that ". . . in this State it (dredging) is being carried too far and . . . its ultimate effect will be same as in every European country where it has been unrestricted by proper laws . . . The history of dredging in France and in Great Britain is very instructive and may be studied with much profit by those who are interested in the preservation of the oyster beds of the Chesapeake Bay."

Even at this late date, Maryland's need for oyster conservation has aroused little enthusiasm, consequently, almost all of the fine Tangier Sound area and the Southeast and Southwest Middles, to mention three sources of an especially luscious oyster, are barren.

The history of the diamond-back terrapin in Maryland illustrates the necessity for conservation plus markets. Before 1900, diamond-backs could be bought for three cents per pound. Along came the glamorous publicity of the first decades of the 20th century, when terrapin à la Maryland was served at dinners given by Diamond Jim Brady, at banquets for Washington statesmen, and at meetings of international gourmets. By 1920, diamond-backs had been publicized almost into extinction, and prices paid for terrapin ranging from five to ten dollars each are on record. It was not until 1926 that conservationists were heard demanding that protection (closed season, minimum size) should be provided for this Maryland resource. The result was that ten years later the catch became appreciable (it takes eight or nine years for the terrapin to reach market size), reaching an estimated 100,000 pounds for 1936. But by that time, producers in other States were raising terrapin on farms, and a substitute, the golden-stripe, from the midwest, appeared on restaurant menus. In 1939 and 1940, conservationists stocked Maryland's streams and marshes with young terrapin. Now fishermen in the terrapin country report an abundance but little incentive to catch them.

During the past few years, a substantial shell-button industry has developed at Federalsburg. As this town lies midway between the Ocean and the Bay, one presumes that shells from both these bodies of water are used. However, this is not true because the Atlantic Coast shells have been found unsuitable for buttons, lacking tensile strength and workability. Consequently, the factory must import all its shells from Tahiti, Bombay and the Red Sea.

An interesting sideline is pursued by the watermen of Dorchester and Somerset Counties: catching and salting down hog-chokers for crab bait. The hog-choker is a small, tough, flat fish abounding in the shallow waters of the Bay. Several barrels of them can be caught in a day by the use of the hog-choker roller, a home-made dredge-net. A wooden roller six feet

wide is set in a metal frame with a net bag attached and pulled by motor boats over the mud flats in the early spring when the hog-chokers are most plentiful. They bring a good price from operators of crab trotlines.

If sales of canned whiting continue at their present level, Maryland canners will soon be operating the year around instead of only during the shad and alewife season. At the present time, three large canners in Maryland are canning whiting which come to them from Wildwood, N. J., and they have been able to offer them to the retail trade at prices slightly under those of canned alewife. Demand is said to be excellent.

Clammers have been doing well on Maryland's seaside. The catches have averaged 800 to 2,000 clams per man per day.



The Middle Atlantic area is the source of more than half the oysters produced in the United States, yielding annually about 50 million pounds, of which 35 million come from the Chesapeake Bay. Oysters are the most valuable aquatic crop of the region. They brought fishermen, in recent pre-war years, an annual income of about 5 million dollars. In the country as a whole, they rank second only to salmon in value.



About half the Middle Atlantic crop of oysters comes from public grounds, half from privately leased and cultivated beds. The more northerly States of the group, New York and New Jersey, follow the New England practice and have developed large private industries. Delaware takes about a third of its yield from private beds, Virginia about three-fourths. Maryland, however, which produces more oysters than any other State in the country, takes all but a negligible amount from the public rocks. The small oyster production in North Carolina is entirely from public grounds.

--Conservation Bulletin No. 38