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CONSERVATION IN THE FUTURE OF NEW BEDFORD'S FISHING INDUSTRY

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Each of us who has seen a trawler unloading tons of fish has wondered, "How can it be?" This has been going on for centuries and still there are fish in the sea. The sea must be inexhaustable.

But every fisherman knows that sometime he can catch fish and sometimes he cannot. Where he loaded his vessel last year, this year he cannot find the fish. When in 1928 the big Boston trawlers caught 250 to 300 thousand pounds of haddock on Georges Bank each trip, now they can catch less than 100 thousand pounds. In 1942 small draggers caught 20 to 30 thousand pounds of yellowtail flounder off No Mans Land and fishermen had to have limits on the catch because the port of New Bedford could not handle the fish. Now they are lucky to catch 5 thousand pounds.

Are these downward trends a low point in a cycle and will the fish come back in a few years? They do in some fisheries such as mackerel. Or has this decline been caused by the fishing so that as long as we continue to fish so heavily we cannot expect the fish to recover?

The answers to these questions come as we study the fish. We know that mackerel have come and gone for many decades. Good years follow bad years. We have learned that this is probably caused by the effect of weather on the spawn rather than fishing. The fisherman should catch them when he can.

¹ Radio talk over WMBH, New Bedford, Massachusetts on January 30, 1950, 9:00 p.m.

With haddock, however, there has been a continuing decline interrupted by a brief recovery during the early part of the war when the vessels went into the Navy. In our studies of haddock we have learned that the haddock on Georges Bank, which extends a hundred miles or so east of Cape Cod, stay near the New England shores. They do not migrate to Canadian banks or the depths of the ocean. They are available to our fleets and our fleets catch about half of all of the haddock on the bank every year.

This high rate of capture is possible because haddock grow rapidly, but it is apparent that with the continuing decline in the fishery the growth has not quite made up for the great number which have been caught.

The main reason for this lack is that they have been caught a little too small. Many small fish are marketed and many too small for the market are thrown away at sea. In 1947 the fleet landed 42 million haddock and threw away 17 million more. If these small fish had been left in the sea, they would double in weight in a year and would add that much to the catch in the next few years.

In order to save these small fish, the Fish and Wildlife Service has recommended a minimum size limit of 16-1/2 inches which is 1-1/2 pound haddock, and a minimum size mesh of about 5 inches. These measures would be modified by exempting from the mesh restrictions small boats of less than 50 gross tons and boats fishing primarily for redfish, and by permitting all boats to land a small percentage of undersized fish.

We feel that this measure would go far to correct the unnecessary destruction of young, rapidly-growing fish. Let's let the haddock grow to the best market size just as we do our beef cattle and our broilers!

These regulations were designed to correct the waste which has been going on for years, but there is a new development in the New Bedford fishing industry which makes a regulation increasingly important. This is the healthy young industry, the trash fishery, which has mushroomed during the past year. This is the fishery which is using the waste fish such as dogfish, skates, red hake, which are not eaten but which can be used for fish meal. It is an exciting new development which has brought business to New Bedford and is here to stay. It should not damage the existing fishery, however, by bringing in haddock and yellowtail flounder which are too small for the edible fish market and selling them for trash.

Conservation has a place in the future of New Bedford's fishery in finding a way for the new trash fishery to exist along with the established fisheries, and in finding ways to prevent the waste which is money out of pocket in the years to come. You will be hearing more about it.