

Now that there is a Gulf States Marine Fisheries Commission it is hoped that the Commission will make one of its major objectives the fostering and development of the oyster industry of the Gulf. There is no objective with greater promise of increasing the productive wealth of the Gulf coastlines. If it has not already established a section devoted to the problems of the oyster industry, to furthering its development, it is to be hoped that this may become an established fact shortly. The Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission has already demonstrated great capabilities in coordinating the efforts and furthering developments in other comparable fields.

The future development of the oyster industry is not so much dependent on an increase of our scientific knowledge of what to do as it is upon political consideration and practical application of knowledge now available.

Latent Oyster Resources Of Florida

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ACCORDING TO THE STATISTICAL DATA for 1945, Florida contributes annually to the national supply of sea food only 1.6 million pounds of oyster meat, or less than 2 per cent of the average annual production of oysters in the United States. About 93 per cent of this quantity are produced by public oyster grounds and only 7 per cent are harvested from privately leased bottoms. The west coast of Florida contributes the greatest part, namely about 1.5 million pounds and is therefore much more significant than the east coast, which produces only 0.7 million pounds.

In relation to the very long coastal line of the State the total harvest of oysters is very small. Furthermore, the yield of oyster meat is very low. One standard bushel of Florida oysters averages only 3 pounds of meat as compared with 7 or 8 pounds obtainable from a bushel of oysters in Long Island Sound and in Delaware Bay. The low figure of yield is an index of a poor quality of oyster meats, which is typical for the wild oysters usually found on public grounds.

Fifty or more years ago the Florida coast abounded in oysters, the quality of which, especially of those from Apalachicola Bay and adjacent waters, compared favorably with the best oysters produced in the country. Thus, the present situation cannot be entirely attributed to unfavorable natural conditions. It is reasonable to conclude that the decline in the productivity of bottoms and poor yield of oyster meat are the results of the lack of management of public oyster grounds and of the inability of private oyster growers to engage in the cultivation or oyster farming in State waters.

According to the detailed survey made in 1897 by Lt. F. Swift, U.S.N., there were 12,214 acres of grounds suitable for oyster culture in St. Vincent Sound, Apalachicola and St. George Sound. Although since that time some of these grounds have been destroyed, recent observations indicate that about 7000 acres of bottom may still be suitable for oyster culture. If properly attended, this area alone should produce annually 700,000 bushels of oysters, or at least 2,100,000 pounds of oyster meat. There are other areas, namely near Cedar Keys, in Tampa Bay, in Ft. Myers region, near Fernandina and in Indian River which may be developed as productive oyster bottoms.

Among the obstacles impeding the development of oyster industry in Florida, the most serious ones are an inadequate supply of shells for cultch and of seed

oysters for replanting, the destruction of oysters by drills and conchs, and the increasing domestic and industrial pollution of coastal waters. The man-made difficulties can be overcome by better management of oyster resources and by taking advantage of the favorable natural conditions which encourage prolific propagation of oysters and their rapid growth.

No success in the rehabilitation of oyster grounds may be expected, however, until the problem of controlling drills and conchs is solved and the pollution of water is checked. At present the predatory marine snails destroy the seed oysters so rapidly that the young generation of oysters is wiped out before it reaches maturity and has a chance to spawn. In the list of shellfisheries research projects the control of snails in Florida waters must be given the highest priority. Second in importance is the problem of combating and preventing the growing pollution of coastal waters.

Rehabilitation of oyster grounds is expensive, the cost varying at present from 100 to 150 dollars per acre. These expenses may be materially decreased by mechanization of harvesting and by establishing seed oyster resources near the growing or maturing grounds. Even with the most efficient methods of harvesting and having at its service best shellfish experts, the State of Florida, with the funds available at present for this purpose, can rehabilitate only a small part of depleted oyster grounds. It appears, therefore, advisable to encourage private oyster farming and invite the industry to invest the capital in the rehabilitation of oyster resources. The process can be expedited by establishing State seed oyster grounds from which seed oysters may be supplied at cost to private planters and by organizing experimental or demonstration oyster farms for further study of the best methods of oyster culture in Florida. Oyster resources of the State, now deteriorating because of neglect and lack of management, may be developed through cultivation carried out jointly by the State and private oyster growers.