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Chairman—RICHARD A. KAHN, Chief, Branch of Economics Facilities,
Defense Fisheries Administration, Washington, D. C.

Fisheries in the Netherlands Antilles

MR. PH. VAN GELDEREN

The Netherlands Embassy, Washington, D. C.

Two years ago at this Institute the writer discussed the fisheries in and around Surinam. This paper deals with the fisheries in the Netherlands Antilles, which, like Surinam, are a part of the Kingdom of the Netherlands.

Although the Netherlands Antilles are surrounded by large sea areas and consequently could, under normal circumstances, make an important contribution to the world production of fish, it is nevertheless unfortunately a fact that there is no well organized fishing industry in this territory as yet.

The Netherlands Antilles consist of six islands. Three of these, Aruba, Curacao and Bonaire, belong to the Leeward Isles, close to Venezuela, whereas the other three, St. Martin (part of which is French), St. Eustacius and Saba belong to the Windward group. The latter group are about 500 miles north-east of the first group and in the area of the Trade Wind. The Leeward Isles, with a population of about 160,000 have good transportation facilities with the outside world, while the other group, with a population of about 3,600, is handicapped in this respect.

The conditions which prevail in these islands require mention since they are largely the cause of the very modest development of the fishery. Large oil refineries have been established on Curacao and Aruba partly as a consequence of the excellent port facilities available there. This industry has contributed largely to the prosperity of the Antilles. Since the oil industry needs many laborers and pays good wages, this industry has attracted a considerable part of the available labor, especially among the younger workers. This has resulted in a certain amount of neglect of agriculture and a decrease in the production of salt, which used to be an important export product. Furthermore, the number of those who have chosen fishing as their profession has become smaller and smaller. When a serious start was made toward developing the fishing industry, the labor problem immediately proved to be one of the largest obstacles. It seems peculiar that Dutchmen, who always have been seafarers, with fishing as a prominent trade, could not succeed in settling even sufficient skilled fishermen in the Antilles to give the native population training in fishing as it is carried out in the Netherlands. The fact is, however, that the fisherman, unlike other groups of the Dutch population, has for generations been tied to the place of his birth. He may carry out his profession far from home for some time, but sooner or later he wants to return to the old familiar place in his fatherland. Since the Netherlands Antilles have about 164,000 inhabitants in an area of 364 square miles (part of which is unfit for habitation) or about 450 inhabitants per square mile compared to about 50 persons per square mile in the U.S.A., there can be no question of large-scale immigration to supply labor for the fishing industry, at least for the time being.

In the past various Netherlands experts have studied the deposits at the bottom of the seas which surround the islands, the currents, and the plankton and have tried to determine whether these waters are sufficiently rich to support profitable exploitation of fishing locally. Among other things it was found that the peculiar topographical relationships between Curacao, Bonaire and the mainland cause subsurface countercurrents, opposite in direction to surface currents, in a kind of deep channel which extends far into the East along the coast of Venezuela. At the surface there are often sharp drops in the temperature of the water. These are, of course, very important in influencing the distribution of floating fish eggs and fish larvae, which are conducted through the Westerly surface current of the rich fishing waters—for instance along the North coast of Venezuela—towards the islands of the Netherlands Antilles. These currents, of course, are of great importance in determining the potential for fishing in these waters. There are large shallow areas and banks of a low and sandy coast around the islands, and shallow bays with a rich flora, and the Leeward Isles seem to be situated very favorably for a worthwhile development of fisheries. There are a number of deep grounds where fish appear to be plentiful.

Some remarks are in order at this point about the present condition of the fishing industry, on the question of whether any substantial improvements are to be expected in the next few years.

The fish supply in the islands is considered insufficient to satisfy existing demand there. Around Curacao, Aruba and Bonaire some shrimp are caught, but the quantity is scarcely sufficient for local needs. Dried shrimp in barrels and in tins are even imported from the United States.

St. Martin has an increasing export of fresh lobster which is shipped by plane, mostly to Curacao and Puerto Rico. Some shrimp are caught around St. Martin, but also in insufficient quantities, and this type of fishing is only possible during the rainy season.

In 1949 a fishing corporation at Willemstad started using a trawler of about 175 tons for deep sea fishing in the waters around Curacao. The results proved unsatisfactory. One of the reasons evidently was, paradoxically, the lack of sufficient market for the fish landed. In Curacao and Bonaire fish markets have now been established and the one in Curacao has been successful. The number of places where ice can be obtained for the preservation of fish, however, are very limited.

The following figures might be helpful to show the quantity of fish products necessary for the local population. In 1950 the import of fish to the islands of Curacao and Aruba amounted to about 4½ million pounds, that is, about 30 pounds per capita per year. Local fishing does not exceed 1.1 million pounds, or about 7 pounds per capita.

What are the possibilities of establishing a fishing industry? First of all it should be stated that the Information Service for the Prosperity Plan of the Netherlands Antilles is active in working out plans for a prosperous development of the fishing industry in the most economical manner. At present this industry is not keeping pace with the progress which is taking place elsewhere, even in underdeveloped countries. In a subtropical territory like the Netherlands Antilles one of the first requirements is the availability of facilities for preserving the fish. The fact that salt is available in large quantities is helpful in this connection.

The processing of fish scrap might be developed. Lobster and shrimp fishing could undoubtedly be expanded considerably. In the past an experiment has been made with the smoking of a small saltwater fish, the masbargo, related to the mackerel family, which is sometimes found in large shoals near Bonaire. The experiment was done in Europe, because there was no suitable smoke house available at that time in the Netherlands Antilles, and presumably due to this the experiment failed. It is almost certain that if the processing had been done locally the outcome would have been different.

It may be expected that line fishing, for instance for red snappers (pargo) could be expanded. Red snappers are in great demand among the population. The growing of turtles and sponges undoubtedly offers possibilities. The shipping connections between the islands should be improved.

The economical development of the fisheries should be preceded by scientific investigations, which should show where the fishing can be done, in what way, and which catches may be expected. The groundwork for this problem has already been laid, but some studies must be made of the nature of the fishing grounds for immediate guidance to the fishermen.

The question now arises: In what way should the development be carried out? Although the results of the investigations made thus far suggest the possibility of a fair-sized and remunerative fishing industry around the Netherlands Antilles, the fact should not be ignored that it does not automatically follow that this expectation will be realized. A recent example is the case of the attempted development of fisheries around the Seychelles (a British group of islands Northeast of Madagascar). This project was recently stopped because, in spite of the rich fishing grounds reported by investigators, the result did not live up to predictions.

In underdeveloped countries where the population is not yet used to different varieties of fish, there is always danger of a lack of a market. Outlets must be established for the fish which are caught. If there are no such outlets, any development is doomed from the start. There are two approaches to this problem. One of these is that fishing grounds should not be exploited until there is a sufficient guarantee of sales for all products. The other holds that the fishery should be developed, after which markets will be found more or less automatically.

No doubt fishing vessels of the Caribbean countries will, in due time, fish where they have the chance of success, and it seems certain that the Netherlands Antilles will contribute its share to this development, thanks to the untiring efforts of the people of these islands and the foresight in this respect of the Government of the Netherlands Antilles.

Some Preliminary Observations Relative to a Study of the Marketing Problems of the Florida Fisheries

CARTER C. OSTERBIND

Bureau of Economic and Business Research, University of Florida

Introduction. Although little research has been done on the economics of fisheries, especially in regard to regional or local problems, and although our marketing research on Florida fisheries problems is essentially an initial under-