The Menhaden.

A FISH of the herring family, a little larger than the river herring or alewife, is at present subject of hot discussion in the newspapers and in Congress, by the committee room. The struggle between the advocates of State control of the fisheries and the menhaden pushers seems to be like that between the North and South; it will probably go against the commercial fishermen as heretofore. Massachusetts has closed Buzzard’s Bay against the year’s run, and it is clear that the menhaden is the principal food of certain large fishes which inhabit this body of water for a longer or shorter portion of the year, and if this fish becomes scarce the food fishes will cease to come into the bay. The bluefish, the striped bass and the sea trout are the most important species known to feed on menhaden at Buzzard’s Bay; the bonito is another with the same feeding habits, but this is not now prized as a food fish nor on account of its game quality. Proponents of the objection to the wholesale taking of menhaden arise from the fear of driving away bluefish.

What are the habits of the menhaden, the source of so much contention? In the Northern States it appears on the coast early in the spring or with the approach of summer. At Buzzard’s Bay, it is present through most of the bays and sounds when the surface of the water reaches a temperature of about 21°, and is often driven into brookish waters. The eggs of the fertilized females of the menhaden have received comparatively little study. The fish come into the Chesapeake in February or March; they are on the New Jersey coast early in May; enormous schools have been seen in New York Bay on May 10, by the middle of June they have appeared in Long Island Sound and range outward to Nantucket and Buzzard’s Bay. The northern limit of the species is the Bay of Fundy; but in some seasons it does not visit the waters north of Cape Cod. In the fall the schools leave the shores except south of Maine, where the fish remains all winter. Where the menhaden spends the winter is uncertain, but there is reason to believe that the young at least seek the deep parts of bays when cold weather sets in. The great schools are represented as swimming out to sea to the inner boundary of the Gulf Stream.

The east coast of Florida has been considered to munk the southern limit of the common menhaden, but Dr. Haskell recently sent a fish from West Florida which appears to be the same as the menhaden of New England.

The food of this fish, if we may judge from the examination of stomach contents, consists chiefly of microscopic animal and vegetable organisms usually dropped about the surface of the water. It seems certain also that oily substances floating at the surface form an important element of its food. Fishermen believe that menhaden consume the minute red and green crustacea that swarm in the water and help support the mackerel and the alewife. Sometimes the menhaden takes food which makes it liable to decay and renders it unsuitable for bait.

Apart from the spawning of the menhaden little is known; it may be considered established, however, that the fish does not breed upon the coast of New England and New York. The eggs fall in large quantities, near the shore, in the month of April, and are possibly incubated by females in December at Provincetown, Mass., which were deposited in the creeks by incident.

On Nov. 5, 1879, Old, McDowell obtained a menhaden from Cape May to Cape Hatteras with unusually large menhaden, near three-fourths of which contained eggs approximating seven pounds. This was crowded from Cape May to Cape Hatteras, but no large menhaden, nearer three-fourths of which contained eggs approximating seven pounds, 10 hours later not one of them remained on the coast.

On Nov. 17, 1879, Old, McDowell obtained a menhaden from the Virginia coast about Christmas this year. These eggs and yolk could easily be pressed from them.

The enemies of the menhaden are numerous and formidable. Among the whole the fowl-back and the horn whale are especially destructive. Dolphins and porpoises consume enormous numbers. Acres of shingles have been brought to surround schools of the fish and annihilate them. One observer counted 150 menhaden from a single shark’s stomach. The horse mackerel is another enemy to the menhaden, and the swordfish and whitefish are not much less destructive. The ravages of the bluefish are so well known as to require only passing notice. In the mouth of the Potomac, the whiting, the bonito, striped bass and whitefish all take a prominent part in the slaughter of this helpless fish. In southern waters the gulf pike, hogfish, snook, and other pelagic species and sea trout may prey upon menhaden. The commercial fisheries take about 700,000,000 annually, but there are a very few who suppose the numbers to be adequate.

It has been stated by Dr. Goode that the mission of the menhaden is to be eaten. Men use it for food, salted and fresh. In winter it is dried for feed, and when put up in barrels and baled at a spot price, the shad on the Potomac, the mackerel in the Chesapeake Bay, or the alewife on the coast of New England.

The provisions of the law for this reason: In certain sections, particularly in the North Woods, prosecutions for game offenses were nullified because bad sentiment did not exist among the people and that they would not be resisted to do their duty. The transgressors in another county have in a large measure corrected this evil; and the game laws have been more efficiently enforced.

In the particular counties referred to there is now less use of such a provision than formerly because public opinion is in favor of game preservation and venators are readily secured today in courts where five years ago such a thing would have been impossible. But elsewhere there are evidences of the provision being urgently needed. It ought to be within the option of the game protector, when he finds that the District Attorney of New York city will not do his duty, to remove the cause to another county.

Take the instance of the Delmonico uncooked woodcock — when that fish is obtained at a high price, they now are sold away, like a woodcock on ice. After making the game protector all sorts of promises, that the case will be tried; and we have weak woodcocks on the February 23, and move to a like effect, he put it into the City Court, where as No. 5,041 it has a thumb and a foot ahead of it, and where in the customary order of events it will keep for months to come, like a woodcock in Delmonico’s refrigerator. The game protector has all the evidence required; there is no reason why the case, dating from July of 1879, should not have been tried months ago. Dr. Flett displayed any willingness to prosecute the Fifth Avenue restaurant concern. If one case like this is to be refrigerated by the game protector, why not many more? They are not treated in the same manner. Under these conditions the protector should be empowered to take his bills, and file his papers on the telephone in the presence of the law stricken out, and with New York District Attorney who would refrain from woodcock case prosecutions, Delmonico’s not to try another year serving birds to its guests out of season, with a snap of the thumb to game protectors and the sportmen of the State.

SNAP SHOTS.

A REPORT has been going the rounds that the Department of Agriculture is thinking of importing the mungee into this country to make war on vermin. We are enabled to state on the best of authority that the Department never contemplated such an importation into the United States. The introduction of exotic species in general is contrary to the policy of the Department, and has been for many years, as appears in the published reports of Drs. C. Hart Merriam, Chief of the Bureau of Ornithology and Mammalogy. The newspaper article which we are inclined to regard as exaggerated, the mungee was based on the vivid imagination of a reporter.

The Potriville (Pa.) Game and Fish Protective Association is an enlisting organization, whose members, on skilfully selected drives and the widespread use of shot, might establish a home for game in southern Pennsylvania, and could help to advance the cause of game preservation to a point where the 90,000,000 acres of land in Pennsylvania could be thrown open and preserved. The railroad companies could make the game preserve payable and open it to the public at the season of the year when the deer and other wild game are in the best condition for hunting.