



# DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

## INFORMATION SERVICE

OFFICE OF THE COORDINATOR OF FISHERIES

For Immediate Release  
Monday, May 17, 1943 W

OWI-1863

Fewer sponges were sold in the Tarpon Springs, Fla., Exchange, center of the U. S. sponge business, in 1942 than during any other year in the history of the Exchange, according to Harold L. Ickes, Coordinator of Fisheries. Only 184,280 pounds, worth \$1,700,247, were sold through the Exchange last year, in contrast to 500,000 to 600,000 pounds in good years. Demand for sponges is so great that this small crop commanded a higher price than any other since the Exchange was organized.

The present scarcity of sponges is due to several causes; shortage of divers, Coast Guard restrictions on the movement of vessels, and a decline in imports. Extreme scarcity of sponges for civilian needs is due to the fact that what sponges are available are being diverted largely to military use.

Best known to the public through their household uses, sponges have long been vastly important in arts and industries and are now serving a variety of war-time purposes. Surgical operations and the cleaning of many instruments and machines of war require the absorptiveness, durability, and softness found only in sponges.

The most important single cause of the decline in sponge production is the scarcity of experienced fishermen. The backbone of the Florida sponge industry is the fishery conducted by divers, who take high-grade sponges at depths up to 100 feet. The skill and experience of these divers are so useful to the Navy that the industry has lost large numbers of irreplaceable men.

Coast Guard regulations imposed in November 1942, requiring vessels to return to port each night, seriously handicapped the industry. Divers ordinarily remain at sea 30 days or more, and the necessity of running to and from the sponge grounds each day left little time for fishing. On January 30 the restrictions were relaxed when a number of anchorages were established at intervals along the coast and about 10 miles offshore. Coast Guard boats are stationed at each of these points and the sponge boats now come in for the night to the anchorage nearest the grounds they are working.

Imports from the Bahama Islands, including the prized velvet sponge, declined almost to the vanishing point after 1939, when a disease of unknown origin

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swept the Bahama beds and killed most of the sponges. Loss of these imports and wartime interference with shipments from such distant places as Australia have further reduced the quantities of sponges available in American markets.

Reports in 1939 that the disease which killed off most of the choice Bahama sponges was spreading to the Florida Keys alarmed the United States industry. Fortunately, the disease never gained a real foothold in United States Waters, and experts of the Fish and Wildlife Service report that it died out in 1940. While the cause of the devastating disease is not fully understood, scientists believe it was a water-borne infection in which a fungus growth attacked the sponges, causing them to rot away.

Although somewhat plantlike in appearance, sponges are a simple form of animal life found mainly in oceans. Almost all commercially important sponges grow in warm tropical or sub-tropical seas. They are of various colors and shapes, and range in size up to the 6-foot loggerhead sponge of the Gulf of Mexico.

Only baby sponges are able to swim, the adult being a sedentary creature attached to rocks, coral, or the ocean floor. Although unable to roam about, sponges have no serious food problem because their bodies, honey-combed with canals, act as sieves to strain minute food organisms out of the surrounding sea water. Even a sponge 4 inches high and half an inch in diameter draws about 24 quarts of water through its body in a day.

About 90 per cent of the United States sponge production is taken by divers; 10 per cent by hookers. Diving for sponges is a dangerous occupation requiring skill and practice in working under great pressures. Almost all sponge divers are Greeks or Americans of Greek parentage. The great Tarpon Springs industry was developed by Greeks who not only brought in the methods of the Old World fisheries but discovered the extensive sponge beds lying offshore in the deeper waters of the Gulf of Mexico.

Hookers work in clear, shallow water where the sponges growing on the bottom can be seen and reached with long poles. This fishery is centered about Key West.

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