

UNITED STATES  
DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

★ news release

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

Evans - 343-5634

For Release MARCH 29, 1964

FEATURE MATERIAL

INTERIOR EXPOSES OYSTER "R-MONTH" AS MYTH

The belief that oysters are good to eat only during months that have an "R" is a myth, according to the Department of the Interior.

Interior's Bureau of Commercial Fisheries says that oysters usually reach their peak of perfection in May and June--months that have no "R" in them.

Oysters are fatter and taste better in spring, the Bureau says, because at this time they begin to store glycogen, an animal starch, in preparation for the spawning season in summer.

During summer and early fall, oysters become thinner, their nectar becomes comparatively watery and their flavor declines. The fattening cycle usually does not resume until October or November.

The harvest of oysters, however, usually begins in September or October--at a time when oysters generally are not at their best.

Reasons for this inconsistency were explained by Dr. J. L. McHugh, Bureau of Commercial Fisheries' Assistant Director for Biological Research:

"The oyster harvest is begun in early fall because the demand is seasonal and the prices are highest at that time. The seasonal demand may have been caused by the 'R' month myth. Another reason is that most oysters are marketed in the raw shucked state and in the early days storage life probably was longer in cooler weather."

Dr. McHugh said some of the origins of the "R" month myth may have been lost in history, but one of the apparent origins is the spawning methods of the European oyster.

This oyster is unique in that its young are retained by the mother until tiny shells are developed. The presence of the small gritty shells makes the European oyster undesirable for human food during the non-R months.

Dr. McHugh said that changing the oyster harvest time to late spring could result in important economic benefits to the oyster industry.

Oyster mortalities usually are heaviest in summer, and losses of 25 to 50 percent are not uncommon. Thus, an earlier harvest could result in obtaining many more bushels of oysters in a given area. Further, because oysters are fatter in spring, there would be a much greater yield of meats in each bushel harvested.

The net result, Dr. McHugh said, is that it would not be unusual to produce twice to four times the usual volume of oyster meats during a spring harvest, as compared to the fall harvest. The more plentiful supply could bring economies to the consumer.

The tradition of the fall harvest is unlikely to change, however, until enough consumers become aware that the "R-month" rule is a myth and start asking for oysters in spring months, Dr. McHugh added.

x x x