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SEEK WILDFOWL IMPROVEMENT IN STUDY OF EELGRASS SHORTAGE

Calling the disappearance of eelgrass one of the outstanding biological phenomena of recent times, Clarence Cottam, of the Bureau of Biological Survey, yesterday (February 23) told the Biological Society of Washington (D.C.) that conditions observed on the coast of the United States as a whole are beginning to show signs of improvement.

Eelgrass, the staple winter food of sea brant, began to die out rapidly on the Atlantic coast in 1931 and by 1932 the disappearance was so widespread that a close season was provided for the protection of the brant. The plant, a submerged salt-water or brackish-water perennial of the pondweed family, Mr. Cottam explained, is also an important food for Canada geese and black ducks, and to a lesser extent for other waterfowl. It provides a shelter and habitat for shellfishes, fishes, and many interdependent forms of minute life, some of which have almost disappeared with the eelgrass.

Though emphasizing these indirect uses of the plant, Mr. Cottam also pointed out its many direct commercial uses. Eelgrass is used as an insulator, in upholstering, in packing, in the manufacture of mattresses and other articles, as a compost for fertilizer, for bedding domestic animals, and as a soil binder and erosion preventive on farms and in coastal areas.

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Since November 1934, Mr. Cottam related, the Biological Survey, has intensified its close watch begun when the disappearance of the plant was first apparent. Conditions, he reported, have been found extremely variable. The general improvement observed is modified by the fact that some areas are decidedly worse than 6 and 12 months ago and characteristics of the disease are still in evidence in every section. Yet in a few localized small areas there has been a progressive improvement for two years and conditions are approaching normal.

Referring to the many theories advanced as to the cause of the eelgrass destruction, Mr. Cottam declared that none has been conclusively demonstrated. Evidence at present, he said, seems to point to a fungous disease, though for a time it was thought that the shortage was due to a bacterial disease. There are indications, he commented, that the degree of salinity of the water in which the plant grows is an indirect factor.

Some workers, according to Mr. Cottam, have tried to correlate the periods of eelgrass scarcity with sunspots or with the periodic shifting of the moon's position. Other hypotheses have attributed the disappearance to storms, to the changing nature of the substratum or water levels, to temperature changes, drought, or to oil or other pollution.

Mr. Cottam's address was based on a report prepared by him recently and entitled "The Present Situation Regarding Eelgrass (Zostera marina)." The report sketches the history and extent of eelgrass disappearance; discusses the cause of the malady, the effects of the plant's disappearance, and past periods of scarcity; and gives details of conditions in North America and in Europe. Copies of the report are available at the Bureau.

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