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EELGRASS, WILDFOWL FOOD ALMOST WIPED OUT ALONG ATLANTIC COAST, PUZZLES SCIENTISTS

After a decade of study and experimenting, scientists are still unable to locate the complete cause for the mysterious disappearance of eelgrass along the Atlantic coast since 1931, when luxuriant stands of this important waterfowl food were wiped out in what has been called "the greatest blight in botanical history," according to a recent Fish and Wildlife Service report to Secretary of the Interior Harold L. Ickes.

Eelgrass is an important food for sea brant, geese, and coastal ducks. It also has direct economic importance as an article of commerce, being harvested for use as packing material, upholstery, stuffing, insulation, and as a compost for fertilizer. The plant has also served as an effective waterbreak that helped prevent soil erosion of the coastal bays, estuaries, and shorelines.

An optimistic note to the Fish and Wildlife Service report, however, was the statement that though the plant is perhaps only 10 per cent as abundant as it was 10 years ago, the present condition of eelgrass shows "encouraging improvement" on at least two-thirds of the Atlantic coast range.

Alarming Scarcity of Brant, Some Fish

The best recovery is noted in areas of reduced salinity, such as river-fed bays or the mouths of rivers.

Dr. Clarence Cottam, biologist in charge of the Service's Section of Food Habits, Division of Wildlife Research, declared that "the alarming scarcity of sea brant, certain mollusks, and certain coastal fish is traceable at least in part to the destruction and scarcity of eelgrass."

When the Atlantic coast stands of eelgrass from Bogue Sound in southern South Carolina to southern Labrador were wiped out, Fish and Wildlife Service biologists observed that the populations of sea brant dwindled rapidly.

Fluctuations, for various reasons, may be noted in wildfowl populations from one year to another, but the sudden drop in the number of this popular game bird was credited in large part to the disappearance of eelgrass, the brant's favorite food.

When the eelgrass stands disappeared on the Atlantic coast, Service biologists attempted to introduce the Pacific coast form, but the transplantings did not succeed.

Recovery Only Local

The complete cause of the disease of eelgrass is not known. It is regarded by some "as the most interesting and amazing biological phenomenon in recent times." There have been past periods of scarcity, in 1889, 1893-95, 1908, 1913, and 1920, but none so severe or of such long duration as the present blight.

Reports from various sections of the Atlantic coast indicate that the best recovery, however poor, has been made in the southern part of the range, in the Chesapeake Bay area of Maryland and Virginia. These stands are the best that have occurred since the initial destruction of the plant.

On the coast of the Province of Quebec, Dr. Harrison F. Lewis, Canada's chief Federal migratory bird officer, reported "no significant improvement . .

in recent years." In the Maritime Provinces of New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, and Prince Edward Island, he concluded from reports, "there has been definite local improvement . . in a number of widely scattered bays and harbors."

An encouraging increase of eelgrass in bays along the Maine coast was reported, but in Massachusetts only limited local improvement was seen. Conditions in Rhode Island and Connecticut are variable. On Long Island, New York, an important eelgrass area, noticeable improvement was seen.

"I cannot explain adequately the almost complete absence of eelgrass in most of the more saline bays along the coast of New Jersey and the Delmarva Peninsula in Chesapeake Bay," said Dr. Cottam.

Since the disappearance of their favorite food, sea brant have taken to eating greater quantities of sea lettuce, but eelgrass is the plant the birds prefer. And thus far, wildfowl experts have been unable to cope successfully with a condition that has scientists puzzled.

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