DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

INFORMATION SERVICE

OFFICE OF THE COORDINATOR OF FISHERIES

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The population of soft shell crabs in Chesapeake Bay is apparently continuing the increase it showed last year and the production of crab meat and other crab products in the area is at present limited only by shortages of labor and limited supplies of crab bait, Coordinator of Fisheries Harold L. Ickes was informed today.

The production of crab products in the bay fell to 30,000,000 pounds in 1941 but since that time the crab population has shown a "phenomenal" increase, according to a report by John C. Pearson, Fish and Wildlife Service biologist assigned to the area.

An investigation is now underway to determine whether a protective area for spawning crabs which has been set aside by Virginia during each summer since 1941 is responsible for the increase. "If it can be shown," Mr. Pearson said, "that recent increases in the natural abundance of crabs have been caused primarily by the protection of spawning crabs within a sancturary, a sound and practical conservation measure of importance has at last been found."

The Chesapeake Bay crab fishery has varied in the past from a production of 60,000,000 down to 20,000,000 pounds. The largest recent production was 57,000,000 pounds in 1939. Following a severe winter and, it is believed, over-fishing in 1939, production fell to 42,000,000 pounds in 1940 and 30,000,000 in 1941.

The Chesapeake Bay crab is the blue crab which is familiar on the eastern coast from Massachusetts to Texas. When spawned, in the summer, the young crab measures about 1/25 of an inch in length. In this period of the crab's life it has a round body, seven pairs of appendages and a long tail. This form, in which the youngster doesn't look much like its parents, is called a zoea. Soon after spawning the young crab begins the process of shedding its shell, which it does repeatedly, each time emerging larger than before. At the fifth or sixth molt, the zoea changes form, becoming more like the adult and getting a new name: megalops. At this time the crab is about one month old and measures an eighth of an inch across.

From then on the megalops molts about 15 times, every six days at first and then after gradually lengthening periods up to about 25 days between the final molts. Ordinarily the crab increases one-third in size with each molt. The final molt comes when the crab is from 12 to 14 months old. Since new shells harden in two days, only those crabs which have molted in the previous 24 hours are true "soft shell" crabs.

Because of the popularity of soft shell crabs many efforts have been made to find a way to artificially soften the shells of adult crabs. So far no one has ever been able to do it.

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