Reichek - Int. 2879

Office memorandum
10-7-48

# DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

## INFORMATION SERVICE

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

For Release SUNDAY, OCTOBER 10, 1948.

EXPLORE SPONGE RESOURCES IN PHILIPPINES

In an effort "to promote the welfare of the Philippine people who earn their livelihood from the sea," the Fish and Wildlife Service is exploring natural sponge resources in the Sulu and Celebes Seas, Dr. Hilary J. Deason, chief of the Service's Office of Foreign Activities, disclosed today.

Growing world-wide scarcity and increasing prices of natural sponges afford an unusual opportunity for developing new sources of supply, according to the Sponge Institute, an American trade group which suggested the investigation of sponge resources in the Philippine Islands.

Sponge fisheries are now restricted almost entirely to the Mediterranean Sea, the Caribbean Sea, and the Gulf of Mexico. Greece, the United States, Tunisia, Cuba, Turkey, Egypt, and the Bahama Islands are the chief producing countries.

Confined to a limited area along the west coast of Florida, U. S. sponge production totaled 158,000 lbs. in 1947, and was valued at $1,246,271. In 1938, 606,000 lbs. of sponges were produced in the United States, with a value of only $1,070,844.

The United States is the world's largest consumer of sponges. Before World War II, its annual consumption was about one million pounds. About half of this amount was provided by domestic production.

Estimated world production of sponges decreased from 2,450,000 lbs. in 1938, to 860,000 lbs. in 1947. The current scarcity of natural sponges is due to fungus blights which have seriously damaged the western Atlantic beds, and to the wartime disruptions to sponging in the Mediterranean.

Eight species of commercial sponges are now known in Philippine waters. The sponge beds are large enough to permit commericial exploitation on an extensive scale, but the Philippine sponge industry has always been a minor one. Poor transportation facilities, lack of marketing and distribution organization, and heavy transportation charges to the United States (the principal market for Philippine sponges) have hindered the development of the industry.

Sponge production in the Islands was estimated at 6,612 lbs. in 1940, none of which was exported. Two sponging boats, carrying a total of four divers and eight crewmen, comprised the country's entire sponge industry.

Fish and Wildlife Service exploration of Philippine natural sponge resources is being conducted in cooperation with the Philippine Government's Bureau of Fisheries, under the provisions of the Service-administered Philippine Fishery Program. The Program was established in January 1947 by the 79th Congress' Philippine Rehabilitation Act.

In addition to their popular household uses, sponges are used industrially in applying a glaze to fine pottery, in the dressing of leather, and by jewelers, silversmiths, cane makers, hatters, lithographers, painters, bricklayers, and tilelayers. Waste from trimmed sponges is also used in the manufacture of roofing paper and steam pipe insulation.

Sponges are one of the simplest aquatic animals. Their lives are spent attached to the bottom of the sea or to some hard object like a wharf pile or rock. The body of a sponge consists of a rather loose aggregation of cells, supported by a framework of elastic fiber which forms an intricate skeletal structure.

In commerce, only the skeleton of the animal is used. It remains after the living parts have been destroyed by exposure to air and sunlight, and have been separated from the skeleton by thorough washing. Capillary forces in the meshes of the fiber framework enable sponges to absorb water.

x x x