

1877.

NEW ZEALAND.

REPORT ON OYSTER CULTIVATION,

BY THE COMMISSIONER OF CROWN LANDS, SOUTHLAND.

Presented to both Houses of the General Assembly by Command of His Excellency.

No. 1.

Mr. W. H. PEARSON to the Hon. the SECRETARY for CROWN LANDS.

SIR,—

Crown Lands Office, Invercargill, 24th July, 1877.

I have the honor to state that, in accordance with your request, I visited Stewart Island on the 13th February last, to determine as to the desirability of altering the close season under the present Oyster Fisheries Acts, with the view of meeting the wishes expressed in a memorial of the fishermen in that locality, and I beg to subjoin my report on the subject.

2. *Method of Investigation.*—The statements which will hereafter be made on good authority regarding the decadence, if not positive annihilation, of many oyster fields in Europe and the colonies, invest the subject with a peculiar significance and importance, particularly as there are certain unfavourable indications of a similar state of things existing in New Zealand. But this importance cannot be adequately appreciated and treated if those who may be employed have not at hand the results of the experience of skilled observers, and know somewhat of the natural history of the oyster. It is therefore in connection with preventive or remedial measures that I have thought it expedient to prefix, as succinctly as possible, the following observations relating to the habits of the oyster, its likes and dislikes, its friends and its enemies, so far as I have gathered them from reading reports on the Home culture of oysters, and from personal inspection of the Stewart Island beds.

3. *Local Importance of Investigation.*—That a careful study of the subject, and a wise discrimination towards developing to the utmost a resource so bountifully supplied by nature, is a matter of State moment, cannot be doubted by any one who is acquainted with the rapid decrease in Great Britain of this favourite and wholesome esculent—a declension which, notwithstanding that the subject has latterly received the earnest attention of Parliament, and investigation by several Committees appointed by it, appears, by past laxity, to have reached a point almost precluding the hope of resuscitation.

4. *Value of the Oyster.*—The serious consequences resulting from delay in judiciously cultivating an industry which enters so largely into the category of a wholesome and favourite food supply, is evidenced by the enormous rise in the price of oysters in the Home country. In Canterbury, Kent, for instance, some fifteen years ago, the price of oysters was 40s. a bushel, while in 1876 it was twelve guineas, being a rise of 500 per cent. The Colne Oyster Fishery Company, in Essex, paid for their oyster brood at the rate of 32s. a bushel in 1853–59, and in 1867–68, 130s. a bushel, being a rise in nine years of 306½ per cent. In Falmouth, Cornwall, the price of oysters rose from 9s. a tub (or 1,600) in 1863, to 45s. a tub in 1869. At Langham, Essex, in the year 1870, oysters were sold in the streets at 4d. per hundred, and now the merchants are paying 9s. per hundred for the same quantity. The cultivation of oysters, commercially viewed, assumes a position of great importance, beyond that arising from local consumption, as may be seen from the following facts: Mr. Henry Mayhew, in his book entitled “London Labour, and London Poor,” states that twelve years ago the number of oysters brought into Billingsgate Market in one year was 495,896,000, which, calculating at one penny each—at present an almost impossible low price in London—gives £2,066,120. The report of the Royal Irish Commission of 1870 estimates the annual consumption of England at £4,000,000. *Chambers's Encyclopædia* values the oyster trade in New York at £1,250,000 per annum. M. Coste, the eminent pisciculturist, commissioned by the late Emperor Napoleon to examine and report on the exhaustion of the oyster beds in the Basin of Arcachon, in his report to the Minister of Marine, speaks of it as “a veritable mine of wealth, which by judicious cultivation might be made to yield, from its 2,000 acres of bottom, uncovered only at low spring tides, an annual revenue of £600,000.”

5. *Necessity of Precaution.*—Even in America, where Mr. Frank Buckland is inclined to the opinion that the spat will never fail, owing to the superior warmth of the American waters, it was found that the oysters were running short. The plan, therefore, was adopted of only fishing half a bed in alternate years—a precaution which might well be suggested by the French experience of the Bay of Arcachon, where it is found that if the stock of oysters upon a bed is reduced below a certain point, the spat will not be numerous enough for any part of them to survive the attacks “of that minimum of enemies which may be looked upon as a constant quantity.”