

It is impossible to refer to all the statements which have been made on this subject—in the press, in letters to the Department, and in conversation—by interested and disinterested observers of the trend of the fishery, including some engaged in the industry and some officials of acclimatization societies. There has not been unanimity of opinion. In the newspaper-correspondence controversy there have been two opposing schools—(a) the trout-fishing enthusiasts, who urge that whitebait-fishing should be restricted, mainly in order that the condition of the trout may be improved, and (b) those commercially interested in the whitebait-fishing, who declare that acclimatized trout are the greatest enemies of whitebait and the principal cause of their decrease in abundance, and that if trout were exterminated no further measures would be necessary for the conservation of whitebait stocks. I do not find myself in agreement with either. Certainly trout eat whitebait when they can, and without doubt thrive on the diet, but so do many indigenous fishes and birds. The full-grown whitebait, known under the names of “minnow,” “inanga” or “inaka” (*Galaxias attenuatus*), also devours trout-fry. To determine with some approach to accuracy the effect which one species has on the other would require a special biological investigation—and I think that is the sort of investigation which is well worth doing, and which sooner or later must be carried out. But I am convinced that the predominating factor in bringing about the diminution of whitebait-supplies, which has undoubtedly taken place, has been that of human agency. Where the population is most dense and fishing has been most continually and most intensively carried on, the depletion of whitebait-fisheries is most apparent. One has only to refer to the many statements as to the ease with which large catches of whitebait were made in the old days, when they were used as manure, fed to pigs and poultry, and sold at a very low price, and compare this with present-day conditions, to realize that the natural supplies are considerably diminished even in the best whitebait waters. Undoubtedly very large quantities are still brought to market. There are more people than ever who engage in fishing for whitebait, both as a seasonal occupation for a livelihood and as a profitable recreation. This fact in itself emphasizes the importance of regulating the fishery.

The necessity of safeguarding future supplies of whitebait by imposing restrictions upon the fishing operations as conducted at present has been pointed out by several who have had a long and intimate practical acquaintance with this fishery in different parts of the Dominion.

The leading professional whitebait fishermen at Hokitika and elsewhere are in favour of the introduction of a licensing system to enable the fishery to be kept under better control, and to prevent the personal disagreements which, frequently attended by breaches of the peace and acts of violence, have been associated with this fishery in the past.

Mr. D. Hope, of Christchurch, Fish-hatchery Curator to the North Canterbury Acclimatization Society, has written and said a great deal on the subject of whitebait depletion and the need for immediate measures for their conservation. He considers whitebait as the most important of all foods for the nourishment of big trout. In this opinion he is not alone; but whether one agrees or disagrees with him as to the importance of this point, his evidence as to the enormous diminution which has taken place in the whitebait stocks in the rivers of Canterbury is indisputable.

In order to obtain comprehensive information about the condition of the whitebait-fishery in all parts of the Dominion a questionnaire was circulated last year to all acclimatization societies. To the question as to the present condition of the fishery the replies received were somewhat vague, and no information of a quantitative or statistical nature was forthcoming. (The departmental records also contain no statistical data whatever, and although in the last year or two an attempt has been made to remedy this lack, we are still too much in the dark to deal satisfactorily with the administration and regulation of this fishery.)

The statement of returns of catches given at the beginning of this section will afford an indication as to the present value of the industry in some of the most important whitebait-fishing districts. To these should be added the Waikato, which is an important whitebait river, providing supplies for two canneries and for a large retail trade in Auckland and district, for which no figures are available. According to a recent newspaper article,* “It is authoritatively estimated that on an average the industry on the Waikato is worth £10,000 a year.”

To the question as to how present conditions compare with the past, the following answers were received: “Satisfactory” (Auckland); “Very poorly” (North Canterbury); “Fallen off considerably” (Wanganui); “Favourably” (Westland); “Poorly” (Grey District); “Very unfavourably” (Rotorua District); “Not so favourable” (Hawke’s Bay District); “Steadily declining” (South Canterbury); “Favourably” (Waimate); “Not nearly so numerous” (Otago); “Not so plentiful” (Southland).

It will be noted that, with two exceptions, in all the districts where whitebait-fishing is pursued for purposes of sale on an appreciable scale it is reported that the present conditions show deterioration. These exceptions are Auckland and Westland. With regard to Auckland it may be said that the Acclimatization Society officials admitted extreme ignorance of the whitebait-fisheries; and on the other side we have the testimony of Mr. Frost, who has been in the industry for many years, that, good as it is, the whitebait-fishery on the Waikato is deteriorated in comparison with the past.

As regards Westland, I have given special attention to the conditions there, and I am of opinion that in the overfished Hokitika River the runs of whitebait are provided mainly from stock which matured in the less-fished rivers of Westland. The earliest stages of life are spent in the sea, which affords a means of recruiting a depleted river by whitebait whose parents belonged to other rivers in the district, provided that these rivers have not also been overfished.

In reply to the question “Has depletion occurred?” the following replies are given: “Yes” (Auckland, Rotorua, Wanganui, Grey District, Otago); “Seriously” (North Canterbury, South Canterbury); “By nine-tenths in the last ten years” (Southland); “Not seriously” (Marlborough); “No” (Westland, Waimate); “Doubtful,” or “No data” (Waitaki, Hawke’s Bay).

* Article in *New Zealand Herald* of 30th September, 1927.