

The majority of our witnesses naturally favoured the retention of the old size-limits, mainly on the grounds that the fish between 12 in. and 13 in. would, if thrown back into the water, be lost for the reasons given above. The Committee had, however, sufficient evidence from experienced men that if the fish were handled properly a large porportion would survive. It may give the men some extra work to save these fish, but it is work that may reasonably be required of them and is definitely in their own interests.

It may be stated here that the large virgin stocks of fish on our costal fishing-grounds have definitely gone, and it is no longer possible to allow any fisherman to have unrestricted license to take what he desires from the fishing-grounds, with no heed of the future. Our known and possible new grounds are definitely restricted by the fact that New Zealand has only a very narrow continental shelf, and every effort must be made not only by the fishermen, but by the merchants and the Administration, to see that our fisheries, which are a national and not a private or provincial asset, are used in a rational manner which will ensure the maintenance of sufficient stocks for the supply of this essential foodstuff to our own people. Curiously, the financial loss due to not being allowed to bring in these undersized fish for sale to the merchant was not stressed nearly as much by the fishermen as we expected. If, however, it is a fact that the inshore grounds are yielding so high a proportion of small fish in relation to the total catch that any prohibition on their being taken will seriously affect the earnings of the men, it really resolves itself into a very strong argument for conservational measures. If the proportion of small fish is as high as the men asserted in their first objections to the new regulations, then the grounds must be one of two classes—nursery grounds which should be rigidly protected for the benefit of the future fishery, or depleted grounds where the depletion has reached such a stage that immediate protection is essential if they are to be preserved. It must not be forgotten that a large number of the small fish released will live to reproduce their kind and will be caught again when they have attained their full size.

The Necessity for Close Seasons and Protection for Blue-cod Nursery Grounds.—Many of the more experienced men favoured the imposition of a close season during the height of the blue cod spawning season as being the most equitable manner of applying a necessary restriction. The spawning season varies somewhat from place to place and from season to season, but the general opinion was that a closure from 1st October to 1st January would cover the spawning season in this district. It was argued that if such a closure were applied it would be necessary to provide other means of livelihood for the fishermen in these months, but as the fishing is to some extent closed by natural causes during portion of this period the actual loss to the individual fishermen would be small. In any case, past records of catches during this period of the year would have to be closely examined before any calculation could be made of the financial disadvantages suffered by the fishermen from the enforcement of such a closure.

Some of the witnesses, who were of the opinion that these inshore grounds are nurseries rather than depleted areas, stated that they should be protected by closure to all commercial fishing. This is a recommendation which, if desirable, could only be made reluctantly, as its effect would be to force the small boats farther afield, with a consequent increase in the risks normally taken in the fishing industry. The one good result from such a regulation would be a stimulus to the building of up-to-date vessels capable of fishing on the more distant grounds.

Loss caused by Bruised Fish.—Practically every merchant complained of the loss caused by the fishermen bringing in bruised fish. This bruising results from the practice, too often indulged in by the fishermen, of banging the fish against the gunwale and other portions of the boat when jerking them off the hook. Evidence of the bruising is usually not found until the fish is dressed and split. If the bruising is very bad, there may be external evidence, in which case the fish is usually condemned by the merchant, and the fisherman receives no payment. Competent fishermen informed the Committee that bruising is avoidable, and the bulk of the complaints about bruised fish can be traced to the more inexperienced fishermen. This is borne out by the merchants, who stated that certain boats send in practically no bruised fish. Some idea of the danger to our trade caused by this bruising will be evident when it is explained that a great proportion of blue cod caught in these waters is exported to Australia. This fish is shipped headed and gutted, and is not split until it has been bought by the merchants in Australia. When the fish is split the bruising shows as a discoloration which spoils the fish for the purpose for which it is required. The Australian merchant then either refuses to pay for the fish or wishes a reduction in the price. This is a commercial loss which could be avoided, and, further, there is the damage done to the good name of New Zealand products in Australia. This fault can be cured by education of the fishermen and by the merchants taking a firm stand in the matter of non-payment for fish which is noticeably bruised. Some of the fishermen have got into the habit of handling their fish in an unnecessarily rough manner. Fish is more easily damaged by rough handling than meat, and these men will have to learn that losses caused by careless handling will react to their own disadvantage.

The Committee suggests that educative leaflets explaining the reason for limiting the size of blue cod to be taken and for unhooking the fish instead of jerking them from the hook by a bash against the boat might be circulated among these fishermen with good effect.

HAND-LINING FOR HAPUKA (GROPER).

This fishery is considerably less extensive than the blue-cod fishery. One of the witnesses engaged in it stated that he had to go twice as far as he did a few years ago to get his fish. Most of the groper landed are caught on hand-lines, but one or two men use a small number of dan lines. This fish has not met with a ready sale in Southland until recent years and has to some extent been neglected. The problem of the depletion of the fishing-grounds of hapuka is not nearly as serious here as it is on the more heavily fished grounds further north.