

MINISTRY OF AGRICULTURE

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THE VALUE OF EELS AS FOOD

From a nutritional aspect the eel is at the head of the list of fish produced at home, either in fresh or salt water.

There has always been a steady demand for eels in this country. In the years preceding the present war about 2,000 tons of eels were imported from abroad (chiefly from Denmark) and from Ireland (mainly from the River Bann in Northern Ireland). The supplies caught in Great Britain itself were almost negligible by comparison.

Almost immediately after the outbreak of war the Ministry initiated a campaign with the object of encouraging people to catch eels, to make good, so far as it was practicable, the loss of supplies from abroad, and of exploiting to the fullest possible extent the naturally existing eel fisheries of this country.

The main fishery, and economically the most important, is that of the silver, or seaward migrating, eels, which descend the rivers in the autumn. They are in their prime; and as they never return it is clearly of importance to make the most of the opportunity of taking them while still in freshwater.

As an inducement to those concerned the Ministry offered a loan, interest free, of half the sum required in every case to install, or recondition, traps and fixed nets used for intercepting these silver eels, repayment to be made from the profits secured.

The other kind of eel fishery relates to the brown, or still feeding, eels. These are to be caught by various methods in the waters where they are found. Though immature it does not follow that all brown eels are undersized and accordingly not worth taking, many of them being upwards of 1 lb. in weight and nearly as nutritious as silver eels.

The Ministry introduced what is known as the Dutch fyke net as an instrument for the capture of this class of eel. The waters most suitable are those with a slow flowing current and not subject to violent fluctuations in level, where the nets can be set without risk of loss or damage. This is a useful alternative to the traps and fixed nets used for taking the silver eels, where - for one reason or another - the means available for intercepting the latter are absent or inadequate.

The supply of marketable eels depends on an annual stocking with elvers, which are the progeny of the silver eels and which ascend the rivers of Europe every spring from the breeding grounds of the eel in the Atlantic. The rivers of the west coast of Great Britain and, particularly, of Ireland, being first in the line of route, receive the main volume of this elver migration. By the time the east coast has been reached the elvers are appreciably reduced in numbers. This also applies to the Atlantic coast of the European continent. The circumstance accounts for the fact that the Germans established an elver collecting depot at Epney-on-Severn where annually, in the years preceding the present and the previous war, several million elvers were collected and shipped to Germany to stock the naturally understocked waters of that country.

This depot is now under the control of the Ministry, elver distribution being a logical corollary of eel fishery maintenance and development. A limited distribution of elvers during the coming spring of the current year is being undertaken by the Ministry.