

CAPE COD STANDARD-TIMES, TUESDAY, MAY 15, 1962

Weir Fishing Continues But Future Looks Dim

More a part of Joseph C. Lincoln's boyhood than Colonel John Glenn's heyday, weir fishing is slowly vanishing from the Cape Cod scene.

Once so much a part of the Cape, this old occupation is going the way of anchor dragging and ice harvesting before it. Few persons here made their living weir fishing last year. Between them, they owned some 40 traps from Cape Cod Canal to Provincetown.

These few hardy souls give several reasons for the decline of their occupation. First, it's too costly for new blood. Gear for just one trap alone costs a minimum of \$6,000; and the saying of the trade is that it takes two traps to pay the bills, and three traps to make a profit.

Costs Told

To succeed—to purchase the equipment, pay four to seven laborers, and buy a trap boat—weir fishermen estimate \$40,000 of total expense in order to have a profitable business.

As a consequence, a weir fisherman's gear is generally inherited from his father. After all, who, in his right mind, would sink \$40,000 into a trade where costs are rising, and—most importantly—where yearly catch guarantees are so tenuous?

This unpredictability of fishing is the second big reason why the profession is dying. It sometimes happens that a fisherman with five weir traps will lose money at the end of a year.

Weir fishing begins around mid-March, after a Winter spent repairing nets and overhauling motors. Just as the thaw sets in, trap operators expand their crews and prepare for the task of setting up weir framework along the coasts.

Poles Used

Approximately 90 poles made from Connecticut hickory go into construction of each of these giant traps. Pole sizes ranging from 35 to 70 feet are used, depending upon which side of the Cape weir traps will be set.

When poles have been put into the sea floor with their tops sticking above the water's surface four to five feet, nets are brought in, attached to the poles, and a lattice of ropes is strung from the pole tops over the central weir section. These ropes are used by the fishermen to pull their boats about within the trap.

The nets themselves are huge,

stretching 320 feet around and having a 45-foot radius from the weir's entrance. When set in place, the main net, made of six inch mesh, resembles a basket with sides curving around behind a hole pushed toward the basket's center. This hole or entrance is 10 feet across.

Two other nets, placed at the mouth of the central trap, create a foyer effect. In the shape of fish hooks, their free ends, where a fish hook's prong would be, point back to the ten foot weir door. One remaining net is installed, known as the "leader," Made of 12-inch mesh, and stretched in a straight line from a sand bank or bar into the weir foyer, which has an entrance approximately 22 feet wide on either side of the leader.

Fish, swimming along a sand

Operation Explained

bar, will follow a leader net into the weir foyer. Once in the foyer, their tendency is to continue through the weir entrance into the trap enclosure.

Because of their tendency to swim along the sides of any obstruction, and the special design of weir nets, always leading back to the central portion of the trap, fish rarely escape from a weir.

It remains for the fishermen to enter the weir door, unfasten the bottom portion of the net from surrounding poles, and pull it up until the catch packs near the surface. From there, fish are bailed into the craft, the net is re-fastened, and fishermen leave.

Generally, five types of fish are caught in this manner. On the south side of the Cape, squid, butterfish, scup and shad are taken, and on the north, mackerel and tuna are the prime catch.

A good but not improbable day's catch for each type of fish in their seasons would be 10 tons of dressed tuna; 160 barrels of mackerel, at 150 pounds per barrel; 150 barrels of squid; 50 barrels of butters; and a boatload of scup and shad.

Trap Fish.



A trap boat ("trash" boat as they call it) going out to the weirs. The Hindu, coming in. Long Point in background - September 1955.