



DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

INFORMATION SERVICE

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

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United States sponge production in 1944 will continue to be small and prices will probably remain high, Dr. Paul S. Galtsoff, expert of the Fish and Wildlife Service has reported.

The United States is the world's largest consumer of sponges, as well as one of the largest producers. Eighty-five percent of all animal sponges come from waters off Florida or from Cuba and the West Indian islands.

A widespread blight destroyed a vast number of sponges beginning in 1939 and recovery of the beds has been slow since the sponge is a very slow growing organism.

Sponge farming is practical and may be profitable, Dr. Galtsoff said, but at best could only supplement natural production.

The sponge, a very old type of animal which has seen few evolutionary changes, has remarkable regenerative powers. Sponge slices as small as three by four inches, one half an inch thick, can be tied to rocks and placed in salt water where they soon become complete sponges again. These slices will grow into legally marketable size in three or four years.

Several factors restrict sponge farming, according to Dr. Galtsoff. One is that the animals must be planted in areas protected from tropical storms. Another is that the water must be fully saline, and not brackish. There are some points among the Florida Keys where these qualifications can be met, he declared.

Since sponges get their food by straining microscopic plants and animals from enormous quantities of water, it is important that sponge farmers give them plenty of room. Dr. Galtsoff recommended that only one sponge per square yard be planted.

The sponge is capable of standing more abuse, without loss of life, than any other animal, but it cannot live very long out of water. It was suggested, therefore, that great care be taken in transplanting the sponges.

Not only has the blight caused a drop in sponge production, but security restrictions have added to the decline. Many of the best sponges grow under waters as much as 100 miles out and it is difficult or impossible to fish these beds under present conditions.

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Although the United States normally produces 30 percent of the world's sponge supply, very little is known concerning our sponge resources as no surveys of the beds have ever been made. Cuban sponge beds have been extensively studied as have the beds of British Honduras, an important producer.

As a protective measure Dr. Galtsoff has recommended a complete survey of the sponge beds, to be followed by regulation of fishing so that no more will be taken in a given year than are replaced by natural propagation and growth.