

**A NATIONAL
FISHERIES SOCIETY**

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A National Fisheries Society by Charles E. Fryer

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CHARLES E. FRYER

**A NATIONAL
FISHERIES SOCIETY**

International Fisheries Exhibition

LONDON, 1883

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NATIONAL FISHERIES SOCIETY

BY

CHARLES E. FRYER

AUTHOR OF THE EXHIBITION HANDBOOK ON "THE SALMON FISHERIES."

READ AT A CONFERENCE OF THE INTERNATIONAL FISHERIES
EXHIBITION, JULY 26TH, 1883.

EDWARD BIRKBECK, ESQ., M.P., IN THE CHAIR.

LONDON

WILLIAM CLOWES AND SONS, LIMITED

INTERNATIONAL FISHERIES EXHIBITION

AND 13 CHARING CROSS, S.W.

1883

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International Fisheries Exhibition.

LONDON, 1883.

Exchange
W. H. Burgess
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CONFERENCE ON JULY 27TH, 1883.

E. BIRKBECK, ESQ., M.P., in the chair.

A NATIONAL FISHERIES SOCIETY.

Mr. FRYER spoke as follows :

WHEN I was invited, before these Conferences began, to read a Paper on some question connected with the Fishing Industry, and suggested, as a subject, the proposal, which I have the honour to bring under your notice to-day, for the formation of a National Society which should take up and carry on permanently, and on an extended basis, the good work which this Exhibition is, for the time being, doing in promoting a practical knowledge of the Fisheries, and in fostering enterprise in their development, I little thought that my suggestion would have received, by anticipation, such influential support as was accorded to it in the Inaugural Address delivered by the distinguished gentleman under whom I have the honour to serve, and who then expressed the "confident belief . . . that in these Conferences we have the germ out of which, by due process of evolution, a society especially devoted to the promotion of the interests of the fisheries of these islands may spring."

Unless, by some process of "thought-reading" peculiar to himself, Professor Huxley was able to ascertain what was then going on in my mind, he could not have had the

7c. 11.

smallest notion of my intention to deal with this subject : and, although he may be said to have " taken the wind out of my sails " when he uttered the words I have just quoted, I have the gratification of feeling that, whether we take different courses, or sail all the time in company, we are both bound for the same port, and that my little barque is sailing under the same flag as his good ship. I trust that before I sit down I may have been enabled to induce many other vessels to join the squadron.

Before discussing how a " National Fisheries Society " can be formed, we must consider what such a body would have to do.

The interests involved in that word " Fisheries " are very many and very vast. First, we have the fish, properly so-called, and other marine animals, the capture of which is included in the term " fisheries " : their varieties : their food : their habits : their habitat : their friends : their enemies. Next, we have man in his relation to the destruction of fish : his various appliances for their capture : their transport : their sale : and their preparation for food and other purposes. This branch of the subject directly affects the important industries of boat-building and fitting ; net-making ; hook-making ; and the questions of market accommodation and communication between producer and consumer. Then there come the questions of the protection of fish, and the desirability or otherwise of taking direct measures for their multiplication ; of the maintenance of order among those engaged in the industry ; and of their welfare—moral and physical—both at sea and ashore. Last, but not least, have to be considered the large array of industries and interests indirectly affecting, or affected by, the fisheries, such as the manufacturing, milling, mining, agricultural, and navigation interests ; the question of drainage as touching

the inland waters and the waters immediately contiguous to our coasts ; and then, on the wide sea, the great shipping interest, with its questions of lighthouses, harbour-accommodation, "rules of the road," and so forth.

Most of these individual points have already been dealt with in the various papers read before the Congress, and it is needless, therefore, even if it were possible, in a short Paper like this, to do more than touch the fringe of this far-reaching subject, in which each detail,—like the thousand threads in the weaver's loom, where a vast fabric of various colours and intricate pattern is being woven,—has its allotted part to play. A few illustrations will serve to show the opening there is for a duly qualified central body to gather up the various threads, many of which lie ravelled and in a confused heap, and to work them, each in its due order, into a complete and harmonious whole.

First, then, as to the natural history of fish. It is obvious that, before the fisherman can set to work satisfactorily to catch the fish, he must know when and where they are to be found. Before he can arrange to follow them, he must find out whether they are migratory or sedentary in their habits ; and he will find it necessary to discover the causes which lead to their migration ; whether, for instance, the state of the weather has any influence upon them ; or, whether their movements are affected by the presence or absence of food, or of enemies. Before he can arrange the length and depth of his lines and nets, he must be assured whether the fish swim near the bottom, or close to the surface, or midway between the two. Before he can select his bait, he will want to know what is the favourite food of the particular fish he is intent on hooking. But, though the fishermen number among them many acute observers who are able, after long experience, to judge of the prospects of

their night's work from signs which would escape the ordinary looker-on, many of these points are beyond their power to elucidate. A skilled fisherman will tell by the colour of the water, by the flight of a flock of sea-gulls, or by the movements of a school of porpoises, whether a shoal of herrings, pilchards or mackerel is within "measurable distance" of being caught. He will know too well, when the waves are crested with that beautiful phosphorescent light which visitors to the seaside like to watch on a dark night, that his chances of a good catch are very small, since the fish will see his nets as they hang, like a sheet of liquid fire, near the surface. But he cannot tell what part the minute organisms, which give rise to these phenomena, may be playing in the economy of the fish; he cannot always tell you where or when the different kinds of fish spawn; he can only guess where the migratory fish go after their periodical visits to the shore; and he is utterly at a loss to explain the reasons of their occasional total disappearance for several years at a time from a coast which they have visited regularly, year after year, as long as he can recollect. Round our own coasts, off those of Norway, Holland, or France, in the United States, wherever you go, you will find records of the occasional utter annihilation of a fishery which for years had been an annual source of enormous wealth. Many thriving cities, revelling in the wealth of an abundant herring fishery, for instance, have been suddenly ruined because the fish have, for some inscrutable reason, forsaken their accustomed haunts. The history of the ancient cities of Marstrand and Uddevalla in Norway, and in more recent times of Bergen and Trondhjem, and, in our own country, of Ullapool, Fort William, and other places, the fortunes of all of which, made by the abundance of the herring, have been often

marred by their sudden disappearance, is well worth studying in connection with this subject.

It is difficult, but who shall say that it is impossible, to discover, first, the causes of these fluctuations and occasional failures of a fishery; and, second, the localities to which the fish migrate during their disappearance. The list of causes that have been suggested for the occasional local failure of herring fishery, is a formidable one, ranging from "overfishing" to the "burning of sea-weed," from the "building of lighthouses" to the "employment of steamers," and from "making noises on shore" to the "wickedness of the people." Curiously enough, this last reason is very commonly alleged, not only in England and Scotland, but in Holland, and in Sweden and Norway. In the latter country, indeed, the people, some 300 years ago, reproached themselves—or each other, more strictly speaking, perhaps—so bitterly for having been, by their sins, the cause of the disappearance of the herring, that a law was passed for the express purpose of improving the morals of the people, and so inducing the fish to come back. I need hardly say that this law—whatever its effect on the people—had no more effect on the fish than a proclamation calling on them to return at the peril of their lives would have done; or an advertisement in the *Times*, setting forth the fact of their "mysterious disappearance," and asking them to return to their anxious friends, when "all would be forgiven." But the herrings did return—when it pleased them—some years afterwards, only to go away and return again at intervals of a few years.

These intermittent periods of plenty and scarcity—notably in the case of the Great Bohuslan fishery—have continued ever since, and probably will continue until the end of time; but, if we cannot prevent the occasional