
Fishery Leaflet 341

Washington 25, D. C.

April 1949

THE SPONGE FISHING INDUSTRY IN LIBYA (AFRICA)^{1/}

By Henry T. Van Buren, Vice Consul

Contents

	<u>Page</u>		<u>Page</u>	
General	1	:	Processing	4
Fees	2	:	Production	4
Fishing Methods	3	:	Prices	5
Labor	3	:	Exports	6
Season	4	:	Prospects	6
Types	4	:		

GENERAL

The sponge beds of Libya extend almost the entire distance from the Tunisian border to the Egyptian border. However, the most important beds are located near Zuara and Homs in Tripolitania, and near Benghazi and Derna in Cyrenaica. The beds vary in distance from the coast from two or three miles to more than fifty miles.

Greek fishermen have dominated this industry for many years. Under the Turkish domination the Greeks were given virtual free fishing rights in Libyan territorial waters, which they essentially maintained with the Italian occupation until the Italo-Greek Commerce and Navigation Treaty of 1927. Under the terms of this treaty, mainland Greek fishermen were granted one half of the sponge fishing licenses issued by the Italian Government in Libya. The remainder of the licenses were ostensibly divided between residents of the Dodecanese Islands, an Italian possession though mainly inhabited by Greeks and local Libyans.

In practice Greek fishing interests controlled practically the entire production until the middle thirties, when a few Libyan firms began operations. In 1937 the Italian Government established stricter control over the sponge industry by requiring that sponges taken in Libyan waters be landed in Libyan ports. Licenses were issued to all ships at a nominal cost and were not accompanied by forced sales to Libyan buyers. Charges were assessed on foreign catches at the rate of only about 1¢ a pound.

^{1/} American Consulate Report No. 3, Tripoli, Libya, February 1, 1949.

With the termination of hostilities, during which it was obviously impossible to harvest sponges, the Tripolitanian and Cyrenaican British Military Administrators declared the territorial waters closed to Greek fishermen.

In 1946 the Cyrenaican administrators permitted certain Greek ships to harvest sponges under regulations which required a special fishing license for a foreign boat and a requirement that the harvest be landed in Cyrenaican ports. A further stipulation was that the Administration held the right to require the sale of the harvest in Cyrenaica, which right has not as yet been exercised. The Administration opened the Tripolitanian waters to foreign fishermen in early 1948 under the same official regulations as in Cyrenaica.

The Cyrenaican Administration enforces the regulation that all sponges be landed and weighed in Cyrenaican ports. The Administration in Tripoli waives the requirement and allows the Greek Vice Consul in Tripoli to certify as to the weights and grades of sponges taken by Greek fishermen in local waters. As a police precaution, two Government boats patrol the fishing areas inspecting ships to see that the whole catch is declared.

FEES

The following table shows the dollar equivalents of the cost of sponge fishing licenses and fees effective both in Tripolitania and Cyrenaica.

<u>Type of Ship</u>		
Machine diving ship.	\$34 plus \$8 for each diver above five.	\$400. (No limit on no. of divers.)
Dredging ship.	\$8	\$400. (No limit on no. of divers.)
Fernezen diving ship (Helmets only).	\$25 plus \$10 for each diver above five.	\$400 (No limit on no. of divers.)
Harpooning.	\$4 for each harpoon.	\$85 (No limit on no. of harpoons.)
Nude divers.	\$4 for each diver.	\$85 (No limit on no. of divers.)

The above local rates are charged only in Tripolitania, as the whole sponge industry in Cyrenaica is in the hands of Greek fishermen.

In addition to the initial fees and licenses, both Administrations have established a fiction of import under which an export tax of 1% on the value of raw sponges is levied on all sponges caught by foreign fishermen.

In Cyrenaica the work done on landed sponges is held to equal "processing" and the higher rate is assessed at a set valuation equivalent to \$8 a pound. The Tripolitanian Administration ordinarily considers sponges caught by foreign fishermen as raw, and the 1% export tax is levied on the actual estimated value of the particular declared catch.

FISHING METHODS

The most popular and productive method of harvesting sponges in Libya is through the use of Machine diving boats employing fully outfitted divers. The best growths usually found in water from 75 feet - 100 feet deep, are taken by this method. The second most generally used method in Tripolitania is dredging with a weighted net behind a slow-moving ship, but the sea bottom is too rough in Cyrenaica to permit this type of fishing. Fernezen (helmet only) diving is practiced in relatively shallow water beds in both territories with fair results. Harpooning is at present used somewhat more in Cyrenaica than in Tripolitania. Nude diving is the least productive method, although used fairly extensively in Cyrenaica.

The following table shows the number and types of boats licensed to fish for sponges in Libyan waters in 1948:

Method	Tripolitania		Cyrenaica	
	Foreign	Local	Foreign	Local
Machine diving	16	6	31	-
Dredging	8	4	-	-
Fernezen diving	5	-	5	-
Harpooning	4	-	11	-
Nude diving	1	-	10	-

In addition to the above, a few local Tripolitans probably operate harpooning and nude diving boats in Tripolitanian waters without official licenses.

LABOR

The Tripolitanian sponge industry was handicapped by labor trouble in 1948. Previous to the British occupation all diving was done by Greeks, Italians or other Europeans. Subsequent to the occupation the Administration in Tripolitania arranged a series of courses to teach the Arabs the diving profession. The native adapted himself well to the type of work but trouble arose as a result of the customary method of payment--that of giving each diver a lump sum payment in advance.^{2/} This advance

^{2/} Divers are ordinarily paid the value of 30% of their catch. At the beginning of the season ship owners customarily pay divers a lump sum equivalent to 30% of the divers' predicted income for the coming season.

payment method has been revised by most ship owners only after a considerable loss of money and productive time.

No labor troubles were reported among Greek fishermen in either Tripolitania or Cyrenaica.

In order to abate a shortage of trained divers, the Administration in Tripolitania trained 60 natives in 1948 for use on local ships. A part of these may be expected to hire out to Greek fishermen.

SEASON

Local Tripolitanians usually fish for sponges from February through November, stopping only during the mid-winter months for resting, repairing and re-fitting equipment. Greek fishermen usually work Libyan waters only from May through November.

TYPES

Practically all types of Mediterranean sponges are found in varying quantities off the Libyan coast, but species resembling Zimoccas and honey combs are most common, especially in Tripolitanian beds. Tripolitanian sponges are of medium quality on the average; Cyrenaican sponges, particularly the honey comb type, are much superior to Tripolitanian types and bring an average 30% higher market price.

PROCESSING

Live sponges are killed by exposure to the sun's rays, after which the gurry is removed and the sponges washed in sea water. They are then trampled on or beaten with sticks to remove foreign substances, re-washed and then threaded on strings to dry.

There are no important facilities for processing sponges in Libya. Practically the entire harvest is exported as raw or "black" sponges, except for a very small part which is bleached and trimmed for sale on local Tripolitanian markets or for export.

Sponges taken by foreign fishermen in Libyan waters are ordinarily processed in Greece.

PRODUCTION

The following table shows the production of sponges in Tripolitania from 1935 - 1942:

Year	Metric Tons	Year	Metric Tons
1935	48.7	1939	18.7
1936	25.3	1940	war--no production
1937	25.4	1941	" " "
1938	29.1	1942	" " "

No official figures are available for pre-war production of sponges in Cyrenaica, but official sources^{3/} estimate Cyrenaican production as from 60% - 75% greater than Tripolitania.

The following table shows the Libyan sponge production from 1943 - 1948 (figures in metric tons):

Year	Tripolitania	Cyrenaica
19437	=
1944	1.7	-
1945	2.9	1.7
1946	8.2	57.0
1947	7.5	118.0
1948	32.0	45.0

There are no reliable estimates available of the value of the sponge harvest since most of the harvest is processed in and exported from Greece.

From the British occupation in 1943 through 1947, the production of sponges in Tripolitania was in the hands of local interests. Greek fishermen arrived in June 1948, after the Administration's ban on foreign fishermen was lifted, and worked through the month of October, producing about 12 metric tons of sponges as compared with 20 tons harvested by Tripolitanian fishermen who worked from February through November. The entire Cyrenaican production was in the hands of Greek fishermen, the number of whom was apparently not restricted.

The small Cyrenaican harvest in 1948 as compared with 1947 was the result of a decision by the Administration in early 1948 to enforce the regulation calling for the sale of the catch to Cyrenaican buyers. Few ships applied for license under these conditions, and the sale requirement was finally waived in July after which normal fishing was resumed. However, the season (July - November) was too short for a large production as in 1947.

PRICES

Tripolitanian sponges harvested by local interests are divided into three grades. First quality, which represented about 40% of the total catch in 1948, sells for \$10 a pound, F.O.B. Tripoli; second quality, which represents 30%, sells for \$5 a pound, and third quality, which represents 30%, sells for \$2.50 a pound.

^{3/} Mr. Tsamissis, Greek Vice Consul, Tripoli.

Libyan sponges of all qualities landed in Greece reportedly bring higher prices than when sold locally. Cyrenaican sponges are generally of much better quality and sell for 30% more than Tripolitanian sponges.

The percentage of first quality sponges harvested by both local and Greek fishermen was slightly lower than average in 1948 as most ships were forced to work relatively shallow beds (50 feet - 75 feet) because of inexperienced divers.

EXPORTS

Official Tripolitanian and Cyrenaican statistics covering the export of sponges from the territories are confusing because they include the fictitious import and export of sponges landed by the Greek fishermen working in Libyan waters. It would appear from these statistics that the harvest was almost completely exported to Greece, but as has been pointed out this is not the case so far as Greek fishermen are concerned, inasmuch as there is no physical transfer of ownership or increase in value on Libyan soil. On the other hand, the Tripolitanian sponge firms do land and process their harvest in Tripoli. Most of their merchandise is exported to England, United States and Italy, and only a negligible part is sold for local consumption.

According to official statistics the value of sponges exported from Tripolitania to the United States from 1945 - 1948 was as follows:

1945	\$18,000
1946	\$31,000
1947	\$ 1,800
1948	\$55,000 plus

The small value of sponges exported to the United States in 1947 was the result of a very poor fishing season. Sponge fishermen were beset by labor troubles and unusually calm seas, which made it difficult for divers to find the sponges through the green seaweed cover. A large local production and the provision of adequate shipping space in American flag vessels were the principal reasons for the large value of exports to the United States in 1948.

PROSPECTS

Tripolitanian fishermen are planning no important expansion in facilities for the coming season, but the shortage of divers should be alleviated by the large number of graduates from the Administration's school. In addition, last season's divers, both Greek and locals, are more experienced and better able to work in deeper water for the best growths. The Administrations have agreed in advance of the season to allow a virtually unrestricted number of Greek fishermen in Tripolitanian and Cyrenaican waters, with the probable result that a larger number of Greeks will be attracted by the full-length fishing season.

Licenses and fees are at present scheduled to remain at 1948 rates, but there are some indications that revisions downward may be made by both Administrations before the 1949 season begins. Inasmuch as fees charged foreign fishermen are considered high in comparison with the quality of sponges produced particularly in Tripolitania, peak production^{4/} will probably not be reached until such revisions are made.

^{4/} Tripolitania produced 116.7 metric tons in 1920; no pre-war figures are available for Cyrenaica.