

NMFS Celebrates 125th Anniversary

February 9, 1996, marked the 125th anniversary of the creation in 1871 of the U.S. Commission of Fish and Fisheries, predecessor of NOAA's National Marine Fisheries Service and the Nation's first Federal conservation agency. "Then, as today, Federal fisheries science was at the forefront of its field and noteworthy for its excellence," noted NMFS Director Rolland A. Schmitten, in announcing the agency's quasiquintennial observance.

To further the observance, the agency produced a commemorative 1996 calendar, a review of the agency's history entitled "Baird's Legacy: The History and Accomplishments of NOAA's National Marine Fisheries Service," and a special 125th anniversary logo (by Barbara Comstock of the SEFSC Pascagoula Laboratory) and poster (by Katherine Zecca of the Alaska Fisheries Science Center). In addition, another lengthier historical book is in progress.

Many agency facilities are also hosting special open-house celebrations, and NMFS has also helped develop and co-sponsor two Smithsonian Institution exhibits: The "Ocean Planet" exhibit is making a 5-year tour of U.S. museums showing the human use of ocean resources, and "Science at Sea" displays the work of the *Albatross*, the first vessel expressly designed for marine science research, and which conducted fisheries and oceanographic research from 1882 to 1922.

In addition, a 125th anniversary school science project is underway, which includes the provision of 5,000 folders of resource materials for science teachers at schools nationwide as well as special programs for selected schools. Historical information is also provided via an electronic home page on the

Internet/World-Wide-Web (<http://www.wh.who.edu/history.html?>).

The founder and first Commissioner of the U.S. Commission of Fish and Fisheries was Spencer F. Baird who took on the job, at no increase in salary, in addition to his myriad duties as Assistant Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution. Baird's early interests seemed to involve birds, and his reputation as an ornithologist is first rate. Just when he first visited the seashore and when he became interested in fishes is not clear. However, we do know that his first published article on fishes, titled "The sea-serpent in Norway" (Baird, 1846) was published only 3 years after his first ornithological article, coauthored with his bird-loving brother William M. Baird, "Descriptions of two species, supposed to be new, of the genus *Tyrannula Swainson*, found in Cumberland County, Pennsylvania," in 1843 (Baird and Baird, 1843). It (the sea-serpent article) was only his seventh formally published paper. His second work on fishes, published in 1851, was simply titled "Fishes" in the "Outlines of General Zoology," and reprinted from "Iconographic Encyclopaedia of Science, Literature, and Art," published by Charles Rudolph Garrigue, a New York publisher. And while this one was not an original article of his own, it was part of a highly important German work, "Bilder Atlas zum Conversations Lexicon," which Baird translated, partially rewrote, and edited and which played a key role in advancing his scientific stature and career (Rivinus and Youssef, 1992). When that was published, Allard (1978) reported that Baird was "one of the best known men in American science." Baird's third article dealing with fishes, coauthored with Charles Girard

in 1853, was "Descriptions of new species of fishes from the River Zuni," published in the Proceedings of the Academy of Natural Science of Philadelphia, vi:387-390.

George Brown Goode (1883) compiled and published a 377-page bibliography of Baird's writings. Complete through 1882, it lists 1,063 titles, many of which, as Goode noted, contained "important original matter." Interestingly enough, the largest category of publications was on fishes, with 431 citations, followed by 109 relating to exploration and travel; only 73 related to mammals, 80 to birds, and 43 to reptiles. In introducing that bibliography, Goode (1883) provided a brief sketch of Baird's life which is herewith reprinted, followed by a tribute to Baird rendered by several colleagues at the unveiling of an official memorial to him in Woods Hole, Mass., in 1903.

References

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