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PANAMA AND ITS FISHERIES

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The Republic of Panama constitutes the major part of the Isthmus of Panama, which joins North and South America. About 34,000 square miles, bordering on both the Caribbean Sea and the Pacific Ocean, is included in the republic. The Panama Canal Zone, only 10 miles wide, divides Panama near its center.

Exploration followed the discovery of the Isthmus in 1501; Spanish governors were appointed, and the city of Panama was built. This city became the center of the Spanish new world as commerce in gold and other items of trade flowed across the Isthmus on their way to and from the mother country. When Panama City was sacked and burned by Henry Morgan, the pirate, in 1671, it was rebuilt on its present site.

In the 18th century, Panama's importance waned, only to rise again at the turn of the 19th century when the United States constructed the Panama Canal.

Although the influence of the Canal Zone has raised Panama's living standards above those of most other Latin American countries, the outlying portions have suffered neglect. Peons live on a subsistence basis in impoverished circumstances, and the Indians have retained their primitive state.

Highways and railroads are limited and leave much of the country inaccessible to land travel. Small boats are used widely along both coasts. The Pan-American highway is aiding the movement of commerce in agricultural products from districts near the Canal Zone.



Panama is relatively mountainous, with two mountain ranges within its borders. On the Caribbean side, the coast extends about 480 miles, while the Pacific shoreline extends about 770 miles. In some sections there are sandy surf-swept beaches, while in other areas the shore is faced with high cliffs. Coral reefs are common throughout the entire length of the coast.

The fishes of Panama include over 300 recorded species on the Pacific Coast and about 250 species on the Caribbean side. The fishes of the tremendously productive Pacific waters generally reach a larger average size than those from the Caribbean. Important market fishes include corbina, red snapper, Spanish mackerel, groupers, jacks, snook, and mullet. Sailfish and marlins, prized by game fishermen, and tuna are abundant on the Pacific side.

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Despite abundant resources, the fishery industries of Panama are not of much importance. During the years prior to 1936, with the assistance of Japanese hand-line fishermen, the catch was built up to about 4 million pounds, but since 1936, when these men were prohibited from further operations, the catch has approximated 2 million pounds a year.

Commercial fishing is concentrated in the Gulf of Panama in and around the islands adjacent to the Canal entrance. In 1942, 214 boats, employing 529 fishermen, were reported by government sources. Motor boats numbered 29, including transport vessels, while there were 150 sailboats, and 35 dugouts operated without sail. Fish are landed fresh directly at the docks in Panama City. A limited supply of ice and restricted storage space place limitations on the production.

Fish are taken with cast nets, handlines, haul seines up to 300 feet in length, and fish pots. The Indians have, for years, operated weirs in the river estuaries and employed spears and bows and arrows in sheltered waters.

Before the war the republic imported about 2½ million pounds of canned and dried fish annually. Panama's population of 631,000 consumed, at that time, fish products equivalent to 15 pounds of fresh fish per capita annually. While this is the highest average in Central America, it is much less than that of most other areas having a similar abundance of nearby food fish supplies.

The production and consumption of fresh fish, shrimp, and spiny lobsters could, undoubtedly, be increased. The nearness to the fishing grounds and good harbor facilities also make the establishment of a Panama-based tuna fishery logical from every standpoint. Tuna clippers from California already use Panamanian waters for collecting bait preparatory to fishing in offshore waters. Tuna could be canned in the area or frozen and transported to other points for canning.



Further opportunities for expansion of fishery activities lie in the use of game fish resources. The Pacific Sailfish Club of Balboa, which was formed in 1932, has enjoyed great success in this field. Active members numbering about 200 were reported to have taken 469 sailfish in 1938, the most successful season for this type of fishing. These members, with other fishermen, enjoy excellent fishing for snappers, corbina, tarpon, and many other species.

Fishing in Panama and the Canal Zone area is complicated to some extent by jurisdictional problems due to the operation of Canal authorities, the U. S. Army, the U. S. Navy, and the Panama Government. Commercial fishing is restricted generally to citizens of the republic.

Large vessels of other nations fishing for bait in Panamanian waters, unless special contracts have been entered into with the government, must be in possession of annual permits issued by the Ministry of Agriculture, Commerce, and Industry. This fishing permit carries a tax of from \$150 to \$500 per year payable in advance and violators are subject to fines of from \$500 to \$2,000. Under Decree No. 408 of April 27, 1946, which imposes the regulations on operations of foreign vessels, all fish not required for bait must be returned alive to the sea.

