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Harvesting and Selling Mussels

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HARVESTING AND SELLING MUSSELS

Donald M. Harriman
February 1966

There is a small but growing demand for mussels of good quality in southern New England and New York. The market is seasonal, with a summer period when mussels cannot be handled because of their poor meat condition and the problems of keeping bacterial scores within limits.

Two activities are necessary to supply this market. Mussels must be gathered, and they must be packed and shipped. The costs of shipment are such that a man cannot afford to harvest his own and ship them. Only when the output of a number of fishermen is pooled, can an economical volume be handled.

Harvesting

Market mussels must be $2\frac{1}{2}$ inches or more in length, and they must be free of pearls. Usable beds are normally found at or below low water mark, and in protected areas. Since mussel beds are built up by the deposition of fine sediment around the mussels, with new sets developing on the surface as older mussels are being smothered by silt, only the surface of a mussel bed can be taken for market. Clumps of mussels are loaded into boats during the short period of low tide, and are floated to the shore on the rising tide.

The fisherman may sell his catch in either of two ways. He may deliver the mussels as harvested to a buyer with washing and sorting facilities, or he may wash and sort them himself. If so, the mussels should be thoroughly cleaned and separated. All shell, broken mussels,

and undersized mussels should be removed. A better and more valuable pack results if the mussels are also sorted by size. Only water of an acceptable bacterial quality for growing should be used for washing. It may be either salt or fresh.

Packing and Shipping

Mussels may be shipped only under a certified inter-state shellfish certificate. The shipper is responsible for the cleanliness and quality of his pack, whether he buys his mussels cleaned and culled, or culls them himself. Mussels are susceptible to high bacterial scores after shipment and storage. Apparently, the mussel not only collects larger numbers of bacteria from a given concentration in sea water, but it supports an even faster growth of bacteria in its tissues under storage.

One method of handling has been the packing of mussels in burlap bags for shipment. There is a tendency for the bags to accumulate organic material from the shell liquor of the mussels. This forms a medium on which the enteric bacteria grow, and from which the mussels are further contaminated. Because of this relationship, the Sea and Shore Fisheries Department suggested in 1956 that burlap bags be prohibited as a shipping container. This recommendation has not been implemented by regulation in the receiving states, but still is worthy of consideration by any shipper or buyer who is concerned about the quality of his product.

To further prevent bacterial build-up, mussels should be kept above 32° F. and below 50° F. for shipment and storage.

NEED: Research on effect of tearing vs. cutting on byssus damage.