NET-FISHING IN THE DERWENT.

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During the months of November, December, and January, when the freshets caused by the winter's rains having subsided, and the tidal waters get low and brackish, shoals of fish commence running up from Storm Bay and the open coast into the estuary of the River Derwent, for the purpose of depositing spawn in the shallow landlocked bays, which abound from Rosny and Macquarie Point upwards.

Of such fish, the most valuable are Flounders and Soles; the other being Bream, Mullet, Mackerel, Native Salmon, Kingfish, and a few species of comparatively minor importance.

No exact season can be fixed for the spawning of any of these fish, the time of the deposition of the ova varying in different years from causes of which naturalists are at present ignorant; and even in the same summer, many weeks often elapse between the deposition of the first and last spawn of each particular species. The parent fish having deposited the spawn, remain in the river, safe from the attack of their more formidable marine enemies, till their strength is recruited, and return to the sea with the first floods of winter.

The development of the spawn and subsequent progress of the fry are not so well ascertained as the habits of the parent fish; but the probability is, that the fry—like those of most summer spawning fish—are very rapidly hatched, and increase their weight quickly at first, as otherwise they could never hold their own against the attacks of the innumerable enemies to which they are subjected in their early helpless stages. The fry of several species remain through the winter in the comparative security afforded by the sheltered waters of the river, leaving for sea at the end of the following autumn, and becoming marketable in the ensuing spring—two years after they are hatched.

Forty years ago, the bays near Hobart Town swarmed with fish during the summer months, and flounders and soles could be caught in any quantity on all the beaches at Sandy Bay. Vast shoals of Bream, Mullet, and Native Salmon, made their way up to the junction of the fresh and salt water at Herdsman's Cove, in the Jordan, and above New Norfolk in the Derwent, at both which places angling was for several years afterwards successfully carried on.

In the summer months, between the years 1840 and 1850,

anyone standing on the rocks near Green Point might have seen myriads of large fish passing and repassing with each tide, in and out of the estuary of the Jordan, and Bream of two or three pounds each played in thousands about the shallows above Bridgewater, and at New Norfolk.

In those early days and for many years afterwards, all the fish required for the Hobart Town market were easily obtained in the neighbourhood, and comparatively few nets were worked, but as the town grew the demand became larger; the number of nets increased, they were worked night after night without any reference to season, or restrictions as to the sale—everything with fins was swept up, and the nearest bays denuded of their fish.

The nets used were seines of great length, with meshes generally less than an inch square; they were paid out from the stern of a boat in a large semicircle, and then hauled from both ends on to the shore. The fishing was carried on at night, when the bulk of the fish referred to were feeding in the shoal water, or depositing their spawn—in the latter case much of the spawn must have been totally destroyed, because the weeds upon which it was hung would choke the lower portion of the net, and weeds, spawn, and minute fry would alike be drawn on shore and left to perish.

As the bays which were fished near town became exhausted, the men began to follow the unfortunate spawning fish further and further up the river. Unprotected by any law, that which ought to have been regarded as a nursery, from which to supply the lower waters periodically with marketable fish, was more and more encroached upon, and as might have been expected, the fish grew scarcer and scarcer and smaller and smaller, till flounders two inches across, and mullet three inches long were to our national disgrace hawked about the streets. Line fishing above the town became a mockery, and those who remember the sport of other days gave it up in utter disgust.

Angling in the upper waters fared no better, and was partially abandoned, while half a dozen net fishermen continued doing their utmost to kill the goose, which, with proper care, ought to have provided them and their descendants with golden eggs for all time.

In the year 1864, it became necessary, in order to ensure the safety of the few dozen of salmon smolts then descending the Derwent, to put some restraint upon the excessive netting in the river, and the Salmon Commissioners availed themselves of the power given them under the Salmon Act, and recommended the suppression of all netting above the town. At the time, one or two men made a faint show of resistance to

this measure, but did not press the subject probably because, having so far stripped the river, there was not much lost by the restriction.

The improvement consequent upon stopping the netting soon became apparent. Towards the end of the second season the hand-line fishing from boats near town improved considerably, and the fish have since steadily increased both in quantity and size. Angling has been resumed with great success in the lower waters, and is gaining in favor as a healthy and profitable recreation each year. Near the mouth of the Sorell Rivulet shoals of large bream have been constantly seen, where, a short time ago but few, and in some seasons, none showed themselves, One man who has fished the river for more than 30 years, and on whose veracity I can rely, assures me that he has seen a shoal of these fish covering half an acre, and that he believes the river will soon be what it was in its best days.

The bays about New Town and Risdon have been alive with fish during the last season, and anglers in those waters rarely failed to make good baskets.

This abundance of fish in the bays above the town has now excited the cupidity of those few net fishermen who do not consider anything beyond their present gain, and who for the sake of two or three good seasons would not only run the risk of wasting all the money and labour expended, for their own ultimate benefit, in the salmon experiment, but would even wantonly sacrifice the permanent interest of the public, and especially of the angling and line fishing public, by scraping up every spawning fish they can follow to the shallows, and thus undo all the good work which the Salmon Commissioners have done by placing some restriction on the netting.

These fishermen are now urging Parliament to re-open the river, and those who advocate this to do so mainly on two grounds, one the hardship to the fishermen by taking away their means of livelihood, the other the advantage to be gained by catching a veritable salmon, and proving beyond doubt the success of the experiment.

As to the first ground, it is difficult to understand why the presence of a larger number of fish in the upper waters makes the hardship any greater now than it was in 1864. On the contrary; the closing the river has each year tended to make the fishing in the lower waters better at those seasons in which the fish ought to be caught.

Had the net fishermen been allowed to go on as they had commenced, the river would soon have yielded them no profit at all, either in the upper or lower waters, a hardship much more serious than any they can now be subjected to by keeping

the upper waters closed, as each winter will bring a fresh supply of marketable fish within reach of their nets.

It is also stated that in severe southerly weather the men must either go up the river or lie idle at great loss, but the upper waters are only worth netting in summer and autumn, when southerly gales are rare. The men who are really the sufferers by heavy southerly weather, are not the seine net men, but the deep-sea fishermen, who have to get from 20 to 60 miles out on to the exposed coast.

It is a rather significant fact that since the closing of the river, deep-sea well-boats of superior build have increased in number, and, with the single exception of flounders, the better fish have been brought to market in such numbers that real trumpeter are now cheaper than when the river was open, although quantities are occasionally sent to Melbourne.

It is quite probable that if the upper waters were thrown open during the next two seasons, there would be for a time such a supply that the market of the deep-sea fish might be materially affected, and some of the boats withdrawn from an industry which deserves every encouragement—in other words, we should sacrifice a legitimate trade for that which ought to be considered illegitimate.

Even if some hardships could be shown to exist, surely the future interests of the whole public are not to be sacrificed for the immediate and short lived benefit of some two dozen men, for it must be remembered that in the port of Hobart Town, the whole of the boats and gear fitted for this destructive fishing, are the property of two individuals, and that the hands employed in it rarely exceed 20 at any one time. The injury inflicted upon these 20 men and their families, by the closing of the river, can only be estimated at the difference between the wages they used to earn at the fishing in 1864, when it was failing perceptibly, and what they can now earn at any other occupation, and that difference must be trifling.

As to the second ground upon which the opening of the river is advocated, it is by no means certain that allowing the nets to be worked for a few miles up the river would lead to the capture of salmon, for there can at present only be a few mature fish scattered over a wide expanse of water, and no net really adapted for salmon fishing in the wide tidal waters, with a mesh eight inches round when wet, it is to be found in the colony, and if it could be found it would not suit the purpose of those fishermen, who, caring little for the success or failure of the salmon experiment, simply wish to scrape out everything saleable, and would never be satisfied to use a mesh through which a fair sized smolt could pass.

Again, it is quite possible that the space travelled over by

the salmon in their migration seaward may depend much upon their supply of food, and that, while the fish are scarce and their food abundant, they will not travel far from the junction of the fresh and salt water.

Granting that salmon might be caught by opening the river and using proper nets, is it not manifest that the rapid stocking of our rivers would be more seriously retarded by killing half-a-dozen salmon now, when only a few pairs reach the spawning beds, than by killing as many thousands a few years hence, when every gravelly rapid over hundreds of acres will be tenanted by spawning fish?