

III.—A PETITION TO THE FISH COMMISSION OF THE UNITED STATES, SIGNED BY THE FISHERMEN OF BLOCK ISLAND, JUNE 12, 1877.

A PETITION.

STATE OF RHODE ISLAND, NEWPORT COUNTY,
New Shoreham, Block Island, June 12, 1877.

To the honorable Fish Commission of the United States :

We, your petitioners, citizens of the United States and of Block Island, natives and fishermen, believe that the catching of cod by means of trawl lines is diminishing the cod on our grounds, from which we believe that fish will eventually be driven if that mode of taking them is continued, because—

First. At any time the cod will bite the bait upon a small hook more readily than upon a large hook, because the small hook is hidden. The hand-fisherman uses a large hook, for he must, in pulling, keep his line taut, and the sharp struggles of the fish would break a smaller. Small hooks are used on trawl-lines, which are never very taut, and hence are quite elastic. During December, January, February, and in early March, when these fish deposit their spawn, they are very shy, and only a few will bite the large hook on the hand-line. In the past they have been secure in depositing their spawn, thus securing their propagation. Now that the trawl-lines have come into use, the fish, biting at the baited hooks, are taken in large quantities at a time when their destruction involves the destruction at the same time of myriads of eggs, thus directly tending to prevent the perpetuation of their species.

Second. It very frequently happens that a trawl-line with from 600 to 1,000 hooks attached becomes so chafed by the rocks on the bottom that, when loaded with fish, it breaks, and only a portion is secured. The remainder, with hundreds of struggling fish, is carried hither and thither until the fish die. Their struggles frighten the other fish very much more than when caught on a hand-line, for then the captured fish is immediately taken from the water, and but little of his distress is seen by other fish. Moreover, when the fish die, their bodies, becoming putrid, effectually rid the ground of cod until the bodies rot from their fastening and drift away, leaving the water pure again, or soon to become so.

Third. Oftentimes, the fish caught on the trawl-hooks are left to struggle for hours before the trawlers get time to take them on board; and, indeed, this is usually the case, for they use so many lines that they can haul them only a few times in a day. Meanwhile, many of the

fish get clear. Suffering from the lacerations of the hook, and fearful of becoming again entrapped, they communicate their fears to their sympathizing companions. It is very noticeable that since the trawls have been used on our grounds, the fish have been much more shy than formerly, and that they struggle much harder when caught. Frequently they are caught with the small hooks of trawl-lines still in their mouths; or, without hooks, but with mouths still bleeding where torn in escaping. *The foregoing sentence is true of fully one-sixth of the fish we have caught since trawls were used on our grounds.*

Fourth. The hand-fisherman returns home each night and dresses his fish on the land, the offal being used for manure. The trawler remains at sea for days, and sometimes for weeks, even—remains until his vessel is loaded. In cleaning the fish he throws overboard the offal, which sinks to the bottom and there decays. This putrid matter drives the fish away so long as it remains. The trawler works frequently on the tideward side of the grounds, so as to catch the fish as they come in. Thus the offal is thrown over at places whence, as it is moved at all by the tide, which is usually not very strong, it is swept slowly over the whole fishing grounds, poisoning them for the time throughout their entire extent.

We further believe that trawl-fishing tends directly to injure the hand-fisherman; to injure the markets for fish; to injure the standard of fish as an article of food; and, eventually, to the great injury of all concerned in the business of catching cod, trawlers included, and for the following reasons:

First. These trawl-lines, stretched for miles on the fishing grounds, and running in parallel lines as close together as is profitable, make a barrier which, while in theory it only takes equal chances with hand-fishermen, in fact monopolizes the ground to the irreparable injury of the man with a single hook; for the trawl-hooks are placed so close together that comparatively few fish cross the line, being either caught or deterred by the struggles of others captured; and the trawlers can so place their lines in succession or in parallels as to occupy all the most desirable parts of the ground, one trawler requiring the space of one hundred men with hand-lines.

Second. Trawling, to be successful, requires larger boats and more expensive gear than are within the means of hand-fishermen. The boats must be larger in order to carry the fish caught, and also in order to better withstand the effects of storms; for the trawler generally remains all night at sea, while hand-fishermen return home every night.

Third. Trawlers sometimes catch 8,000 or 10,000 pounds in one or two days. They are unable to dress so many fish, as they sometimes catch, which, not seldom, are greatly damaged before they can be taken to market. So large a quantity will glut any available market, and the fish often spoil before they can be sold. Cod become very cheap, and the dealer is led to hold the fish on ice or in pickle in the hope of better

prices; for prices of course fall with the greatly increased abundance of the fish, and the chances are great that he who buys must lose if he sells at once. Meanwhile the fish are injured more or less, even on ice or in brine.

Fourth. As a few days of good trawling may give those fishermen an enormous quantity of cod, especially where from thirty to sixty vessels are trawling; and as no one can tell when such good fishing may come, the dealer buys with great caution, lest he shall have on his hands a large amount while the market is becoming more and more crowded every day. Serious losses of this kind have made dealers very cautious in buying.

But the trawling is good and the trawler is impatient to go to the ground again, and anxious to get rid of fish which he fears will spoil on his hands; so he sells at any price. Thus the difficulty is aggravated, and the amount of damaged fish thrown on the market is greatly increased. When cod were caught only by hand-lines the supply was much more uniform and more susceptible of correct anticipation, while at the same time the fish were sold to the consumer at prices very reasonable, compared with other food staples. At the same time each man could care for what he caught, and thus a much better article of food was produced.

Fifth. When, a few years since, trawling was begun at Gloucester, Mass., cod were caught in large quantities near the port. So close were they taken that they were sent ashore as soon as a large dory was loaded, and in such quantities that the dories were generally loaded and sent ashore three times in a day. Soon the fish could not be caught there, having been either taken or scared into deeper water. The trawlers kept on until now the fish are not caught in quantities, on some of the grounds east of Massachusetts, nor except in one hundred and twenty fathoms of water. As the grounds failed, the trawlers extended their operations along the coast, spoiling the grounds wherever they went. Where they have fished long the hand-fisherman can no longer get his living by catching cod. Now they have come to our grounds. They are nearly all strangers, men of Portuguese birth, and we can already see the baneful influence they are exerting. Nor are the causes of the direct injury to us difficult to find nor hard to understand. The fish are driven into deeper water and so far from shore that we, returning home every night, can compete only at great disadvantage, for we can be on the ground only a few hours at best; and the farther we must go, the fewer hours we can remain. It is remembered well here that four of our best fishermen went seventeen times in one season to Coggeshall's Ledge, nearly twenty miles from Block Island, and caught an amount of cod reckoned at four quintals per trip to each man. Since trawlers have been there we cannot catch enough to pay for the trip.

We would further respectfully call your attention to the following facts:

First. In former years our government, in the fostering care which

it exercised for the fishing interests of the country, offered bounties to encourage men to engage in fishing for cod. A certain sum was allowed for each bushel of foreign salt used by vessels of more than fifty-five tons registered tonnage. Block Island was at that time entirely destitute of a harbor in which vessels could ride in a storm. We were compelled in stormy weather to haul our boats above high-water mark to save them from the fury of the waves. From this cause we could not use vessels large enough to claim the bounty offered; hence we were compelled to compete at great disadvantage with the fishermen of more favored localities.

Second. When, in 1870, the breakwater at Block Island was begun, one of the principal reasons given by the government for so large an expenditure of money was that the work would greatly foster the fishing interests of the island. If our fishing grounds are permitted to be spoiled by the use of trawl-lines, then has the breakwater become of no avail to benefit the fisheries of Block Island.

We, your petitioners, almost without exception, are owners of small tracts of land, from which we derive a small income, insufficient, it is true, for our support, but which, when added to the amount realized from cod-fishing, has hitherto given us a comfortable living. On these tracts of land we have built us houses. Here are our homes. Now that our fishing threatens to fail us, we are very apprehensive that we may be compelled to leave our homes; for if this business shall be ruined, our island cannot support more than one-half of its present population. We are, almost to a man, too poor to own boats large enough to trawl successfully; but in our own boats we have been successful. We would point with pride to the fact that while from most of the ports of the coast many vessels and men are lost every year in the fishing business, not one Block Island boat has been lost within the memory of man.

Therefore we do beseech your honorable commission to urge the passage of a law prohibiting the catching of cod by trawl-lines in the waters of the Atlantic Ocean between Montauk Point on the west and No Man's Land on the east, and thus insure the return and continuance of the good fishing we formerly enjoyed, lest by the ruin of this fishery we shall be compelled to seek our subsistence in other pursuits and in other localities, away from the island endeared to us as the place of our birth and the home of our childhood.

That you will thus secure to us, on our native island, the opportunity to obtain our subsistence by that honorable toil to which we have been accustomed from our youth, we will ever pray.

William Dodge.	Darius B. Dodge.	Seabury A. Mitchell.
Welcome Dodge.	Uriah B. Dodge.	C. C. Holmes.
Aaron W. Dodge.	John Thomas.	R. W. Thomas.
Edward P. Littlefield.	James E. Rose.	Joshua T. Dodge.
Charles A. Paine.	Herman A. Mitchell.	William J. Steadman.
George C. Sprague.	Lorenzo B. Mott.	Joseph H. Willis.

Caleb Wescott.	Silas N. Littlefield.	Nathan C. Dodge.
Enoch Steadman.	John E. Willis.	John P. Steadman.
William T. Dodge.	Charles Hall.	Ray W. Dodge.
Benjamin Rose.	William P. Dodge.	Marcus M. Day.
L. Steadman.	Halsey Littlefield.	Erastus Rose.
Whitman W. Littlefield.	Lewis N. Hall.	Willial Rose.
Rufus A. Willis.	James M. Dodge.	Alfonso Perry.
Giles P. Dunn.	Charles W. Willis.	Solomon Dodge.
Samuel A. Dunn.	Ransford A. Dodge.	Joshua Rose.
Joshua D. Dunn.	William M. Rose.	Clarence Rose.
John Ray Littlefield.	Walter R. Littlefield.	Halsy C. Littlefield.
Daniel Mott.	Lemuel A. Dodge.	Gideon P. Rose.
John E. Dunn.	William R. Mitchell.	William C. Littlefield.
Samuel R. Littlefield.	Edwin A. Dodge.	Richard A. Dodge.
E. C. Smith.	William Card.	John C. Dodge.
Barzillia B. Dunn.	Lorenzo Dodge.	Samuel Ball.
Amos Mitchell.	Nathaniel Lathan.	A. N. Sprague.
Samuel G. Mitchell.	James N. Latham.	N. B. Wescott.
Charles Sprague.	George W. Conley.	Edwin Dodge.
Leonard Mitchell.	Ezekiel Mitchell.	Thomas H. Mott.
Charles Littlefield.	Benjamin T. Coe.	Hermanza Rose.
Oliver D. Sprague.	Lloyd E. Ball.	Martin V. Ball.
Willard Sprague.	O. F. Willis.	James A. Dodge.
J. R. Sprague.	Andrew J. Dodge.	Freeman Mott.
Stanton S. Allen.	Leander A. Ball.	Howard C. Mott.
Lemuel B. Rose.	Aaron W. Mitchell.	Lartis Steadman.
James H. Mitchell.	George E. Thomas.	William L. Milikin.
Asa R. Ball.	Elihu W. Rose.	Welcome Dodge, 2d.
Henry Ball.	Seneca Sprague.	Simon Dodge.
John Rose.	William Sprague.	John W. Milikin.
John E. Ball.	Lewis E. Thomas.	S. D. Willis,
George W. Braymon.	Joshua Dodge.	Andrew V. Willis.
Elisha Dickens.	Horace J. Negus.	Samuel L. Hayes.
Noyse Ball.	C. Negus.	C. W. Dodge.
Charles Ball.	M. Negus.	Robert Rose.
Edward C. Allen.	George W. Willis.	Hezekiah Mitchell.
John A. Mitchell.	George A. Hull.	Charles F. Sprague.
H. B. Steadman.	William J. Greene.	Edgar Dickens.
N. L. Willis.	Samuel P. Dodge.	Eleander Dodge.
Edgar C. Sprague.	Horatio N. Milikin.	Benjamin Sprague.
Nathaniel Sprague.	Elias Littlefield.	

