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Boyle's Column

Scientist Searches Means Of Raising Oysters Inside

By HAL BOYLE

BEAUFORT, N. C. (AP)—The world isn't Dr. Herbert F. Prytherch's oyster. But the oyster is his world.

He is the first man ever to grow oysters in a laboratory tank—a feat that may open a new era in the oyster industry.

For 26 of his 48 years Dr. Prytherch, director of the U. S. fisheries laboratory here, has been prying into the private life of the oyster. He's the No. 1 Boswell of the bivalves.

Convincing oysters they could be happy in a nice sheltered indoor tank was no easy matter. For all their hard-shelled isolation, oysters are moody and sensitive creatures. Transferred to the tanks from their natural habitat, the crusty introverts for years just withdrew into their pearly homes, closed its pearly gates and died.

He learned that instead of requiring sea water of a fixed and unvarying salinity, the oyster thrived in the tank only when he introduced currents of fresh and salt water. This simulated the tidal mixing of fresh and salt water that occurs at the

mouths of rivers, where wild oysters love to settle down.

"The change is good for them," said Dr. Prytherch, "in the same way that winter and summer changes benefit human beings. Variety is healthy."

Wait for Food

Oysters, sedentary as flagpole sitters, can't rove for food and must wait for the sea to bring it to them. They are among the greatest tipplers in nature. They drink fifty gallons of water daily, sifting from it the nourishment they need. This is in the form of plankton, minute organisms which are the bread of the sea, the basic food for all sea life.

Dr. Prytherch grows this food at will in his laboratory tanks.

The laboratory is exploring methods of thus growing oysters under controlled conditions on a large scale.

"It is a little early to tell about commercial possibilities," said the scientist. But he pointed out that oyster beds grown under controlled conditions could be protected from destructive storms and raiding starfish and other natural enemies.

Several years ago Dr. Prytherch learned by watching starfish and seagulls how to speed the shucking of oysters. Starfish open oysters by se-

creting a fluid that paralyzes the muscles of the oyster that close his shell. Soda water, Dr. Prytherch found, has the same effect.

By taking a tip from the seagulls he found an even simpler way. Gulls open shellfish by flying up and dropping them on the beach. The impact dazes the shellfish. The scientist found he could duplicate this "shell shock" by placing oysters in a violently tumbling barrel while water jets cleaned their shells. The oysters came out bathed, punchdrunk and ready for shucking.

Dr. Prytherch subscribes to the popular belief, held long before mankind turned to monkey glands, that oysters have rejuvenating qualities.

"Oysters are definitely rich in vitamin E, calcium and other minerals," he said, "and there is no need to wait for the 'R'

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