

# fisheries fact sheet



Environment  
Canada

Environnement  
Canada

Fisheries and  
Marine Service

Service des pêches  
et des sciences de la mer

Number 3

## The Grand Banks

Stretching for nearly 2,000 miles along the northeastern Atlantic seaboard from Nantucket Shoals off New England to Flemish Cap at the eastern-most fringe of the Grand Banks of Newfoundland is a chain of the world's richest fishing banks.

Covering 36,000 square miles, the Grand Banks embrace a series of smaller banks, the most important of which are Grand Bank (Great Bank of Newfoundland), Green and St. Pierre Banks. From the viewpoint of history, this area has been fished for the longest time and is the best known of

fishing grounds on the North American side of the Atlantic. From early times these grounds have been fished and sailed over by adventurers of western Europe. It was probably the Vikings in their horned helmets and high-prowed boats who first visited the area, later to be followed by Bretons, Portuguese, Spaniards, Frenchmen, Basques and Englishmen.

For centuries fish from the banks off Newfoundland have helped feed the nations bordering on the western ocean, and the exploitation of the

fishing resources contributed greatly to the exploration of the New World. The exploring era began with John Cabot and his son Sebastian. It was Cabot who first noted the richness of the fishing grounds off Newfoundland. His interest was more or less casual because he had other things in mind. He had been commanded by King Henry VII, the reigning Tudor monarch of England, to scour the western sea until he found a new gateway to Asia and its riches. Cabot failed in that objective, but his discovery of Newfoundland had more



Fisheries patrol vessel Chebucto on duty at the Grand Banks

far-reaching effects than would rubies and silks from the Orient.

From Flemish Cap, the Grand Bank extends westward and southward more than 600 miles. Other grounds continue the chain, cutting through Green and St. Pierre Banks to the Western Banks, comprising several banks such as Misaine, Banquereau or Banquero, the Gully and Sable Island Bank. The chain continues southwest through Emerald Bank, Sambro, Roseway, LeHave, Seal Island Ground and Georges Bank with its southwestern extension to Nantucket Shoals.

The species of fish caught vary with the different banks. The Grand Banks area for instance, has been noted for its cod. Generally, however, various species of groundfish—cod, haddock, hake, halibut, redfish, pollock, cusk, etc.—are found in varying quantities on most banks. The lobster, clam and oyster fisheries are in-shore operations. The most extensive lobster fishing grounds are located in waters adjacent to the Maritime Provinces.

Next to the Grand Banks, Georges is the most important fishing ground along the eastern seaboard. There is evidence that Norsemen sailed over the area long before white men established permanent settle-

ments in North America. Originally known as St. George's Bank, earliest records show that it was charted by a surveyor sent out to Virginia by King James I of England in 1610. Samuel de Champlain is also believed to have had a hand in charting that part of the coast in the early 1600's.

Like the Grand Banks, Georges has an interesting history. It was only within comparatively recent years that a deepsea scallop industry was developed there. This species was fished most heavily by Canadian fishermen. Although production of Georges Bank scallops has fallen off, there is still a substantial fishery there.

Scientists say that in the pre-glacial period, Georges was above the sea level and probably formed a part of the mainland. Pieces of fossilized wood occasionally hauled to the surface by fishing trawls indicate that pre-historic Georges was a wooded area.

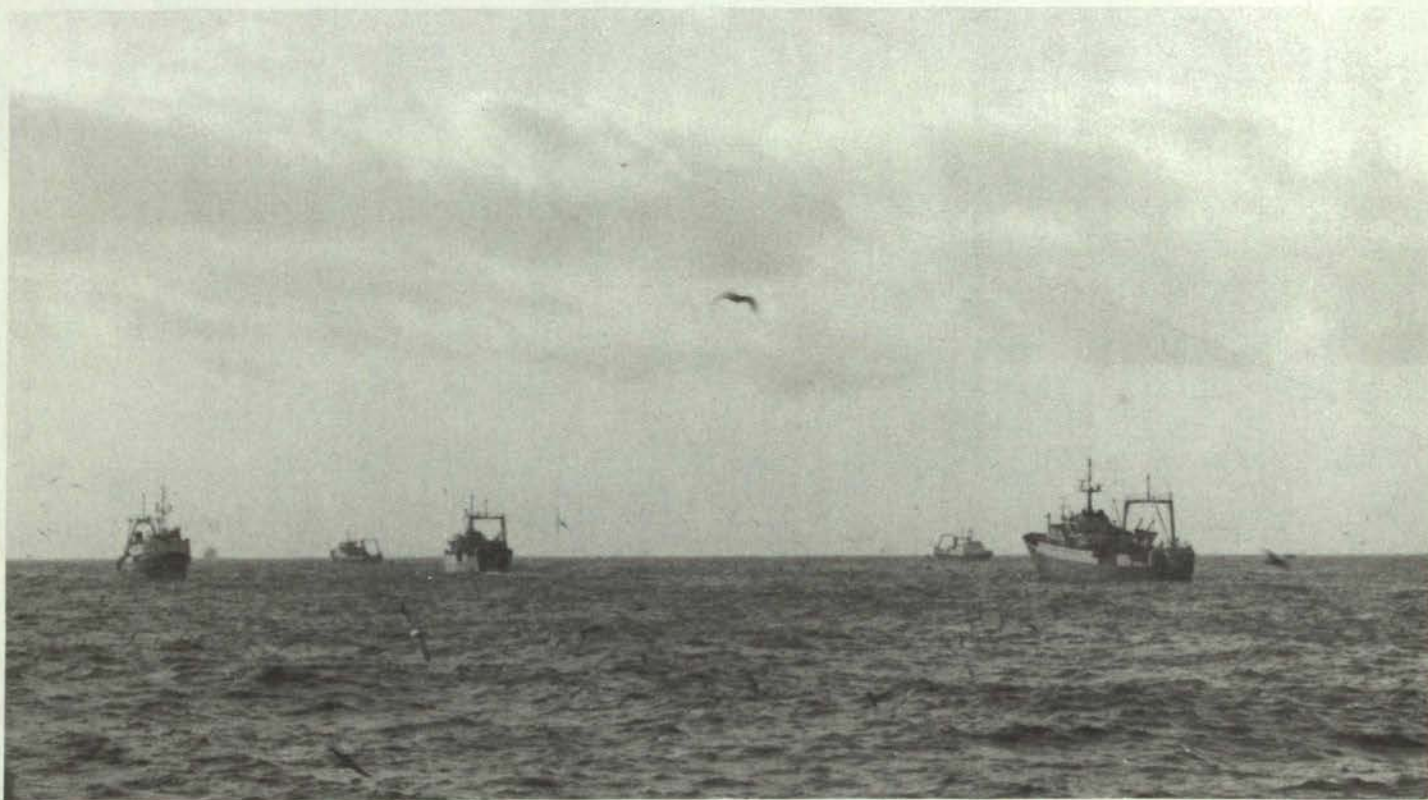
Like the land, the bottom of the sea is composed of sandy plains; hills and valleys and mountains; rocky areas strewn with boulders, sometimes with abrupt faces, other times with sloping edges; there are weedy places and areas of slimy mud, and forests of coral trees. And also like the land where there are vast areas

which have no food to support animal life, the sea has its areas where food is absent, and fish avoid them entirely. There are thousands of square miles of ocean where there are few, if any stocks of fish.

In this age of technology, fish can be spotted by electronic instruments. However, the fishing banks were well identified long before the age of electricity and its accompanying miracles. For more than 300 years, fishing captains of many nations charted the areas in the northwest Atlantic where the fish are. It was a hit-and-miss method, but it worked well. Today there are few, if any, places on the continental shelf—the ledge extending seaward from the mainland—where fish populations live undisturbed.

While the great banks off Newfoundland have been fished for centuries by vessels of several nations, the fishing grounds lying off New England and the Maritimes were exploited chiefly by Canadian and American fishermen right up to the beginning of World War Two. However, all that is changed now.

The war had not been over very long before the fishing fleets of Canada and the United States were joined by those of other nations in harvesting the northwest Atlantic sea



Foreign fishing fleets dot the horizon on the Grand Banks



Canadian Forces Tracker aircraft flies over a Portuguese fishing vessel while on a routine coastal patrol. DND photo

resources. Within the last two decades, the number of European fishing fleets on the banks has grown to 16. At the beginning the most formidable newcomer was the Soviet Union, but the other nations soon began to expand their fleets. Where once there were dozens of vessels on the fishing grounds, now there are hundreds.

By the late 1940's, the fishing pressure started to increase at a heavy rate. Scientists of the nations involved began to concern themselves with the effects of such heavy fishing on the northwest Atlantic fish stocks. That led to the formation of the International Commission for the Northwest Atlantic Fisheries of which Canada is a member. This commission instituted conservation measures to promote the best use of the fishing resource. This management program mainly involves regulating mesh sizes for the nets used. Minimum sizes

have been set to permit the escape of fish under commercial size. More recently, national catch quotas have been established for the more heavily-fished species such as herring, cod, plaice and hake.

While fish has been the main source of wealth in the northwest Atlantic, that sprawling piece of ocean also contains other wealth beneath its rolling surface. Oil and minerals are there, and the day may not be far off when these new resources will be yielding bountiful returns to those exploiting them.

All the large fishing banks have their stories. So do the smaller ones. On their bottoms lie the bones of ships wrecked in recent times and long ago. The most notable of these sea-bed wrecks is the mighty 40,000-ton Titanic. One still and chilly night in April 1912, the luxury liner sank a few miles south of the

Grand Banks on her maiden voyage from England to New York. She struck an iceberg and sank, carrying more than 1,500 persons to their deaths. Since then the International Ice Patrol ships of the United States watch the north Atlantic sea lanes and warn ships of drifting bergs.

# Off Shore Fishing Banks... Cape Cod to Newfoundland

