

FRUITS OF THE SEA



Collection of NAVIGO – National Fisheries Museum, municipality of Koksijde

In this section we provide you with objective information on sustainable fishing and fish consumption.

FISH CONSUMPTION DURING WWI

Before the war, bread and potatoes were the staple foods of the average Fleming, while meat was increasingly consumed as well. Due to the circumstances of war, fish would quickly gain importance, however.

HEALTHY FISH AS A SUBSTITUTE FOR MEAT

The consumption of fish increased during the First World War. Although specific figures are lacking, there are various indications for this increase, e.g. the growing scarcity of meat on the market. The average meat consumption per capita had risen from 15 kg in the period 1890-94 to 31 kg in the period 1909-13. This trend came to an end when the Great War broke out. On the one hand, the Germans confiscated a large part of the country's livestock, not just to provision the army but to feed the German civilian population as well. The number of pigs, cattle and horses in Belgium dropped by 45%, 30% and 41% respectively between 1913 and 1919. On the other hand, the import of foreign meat declined sharply due to the British blockade. The National Relief and Food Committee, which ensured the supply of food to occupied Belgium during the war,

mainly devoted itself to the import of grain. The limited amount of meat available on the market, often illegally, was sold at exorbitant prices.

Academics therefore advocated replacing meat as much as possible by fish. Albert Clerfayt and Martin Herman, two physicians, each published a brochure on nutrition in time of war (1916). They found herring to be an ideal substitute for meat. Thanks to its high protein and fat content, herring could supplement a plant-based diet (rice and potatoes) and provide the required calories. A smoked herring weighing 70 grams – gutted and without head – provides 163 more kilocalories than 100 grams of beef. Doctor Clerfayt also pointed out the qualities of stockfish and dried flatfish. Stockfish has a high nutritional value: 100 grams represent 316 kilocalories. Both stockfish and plaice contain more protein but less fat than herring. To serve as staple food, starchy foods had to be added according to Dr Clerfayt. Mussels were also included in the category of 'recommended foodstuffs'.

FROM A WELCOME DIETARY SUPPLEMENT TO A WIDESPREAD FOODSTUFF

In other words, fishing provided a welcome dietary supplement. Moreover, fish and shellfish are not just an important source of protein but also contain other nutrients such as iodine. Consumption of oily fish such as herring, sprat, mackerel, tuna, sardines and salmon was particularly important in times of food shortage. These fish species

are mostly pelagic (i.e. living in the open ocean) and provide a rich source of essential fatty acids (especially omega-3). They also contain low levels of saturated fats and a great deal of protein, iron, calcium as well as vitamin B and D. By a lucky coincidence, a lot of sprat and herring was caught off the Belgian coast during the war. This fish was not just important for public health, it also improved the unbalanced diet of bread and potatoes.

However, not everyone was fortunate enough to live near the sea. Luckily, the numerous Belgian rivers, canals and brooks provided an alternative. The pollution of waterways decreased as industry had come to a standstill because of the war. For example, no flax was retted in the Lys river for four years. The population of freshwater fish systematically increased during the war thanks to this improved water quality. Many people fished on riverbanks. Crabs and shrimp were fished in the creeks of the Meetjesland region (northern East Flanders). It was easy to make a primitive hook and line. Despite close monitoring and regulation of river fishing by the German occupiers, a lot of households ate fish every once and a while.

Fish consumption further increased after the war. The Belgian fishing industry thrived and more fish was imported as well: imports rose from 68,323 tonnes a few years before WWI to 75,530 tonnes after the war, an increase of 10%. Fish became available to a growing number of people thanks to technical innovations in sea fisheries and the expansion of distribution.

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■ Employees of a sprat cannery pose during work (Carbonez family & NAVIGO – National Fisheries Museum, municipality of Koksijde)

Sources

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