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Short Review on the Halibut Fishery of the Greenlanders

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The Greenlanders have always been interested in halibut fishing. Many years ago before modern fishing methods were introduced some places in the southern Egedesminde district were frequented by a great number of natives in the months July to September. Especially a place named Taseralik was known as a place where halibut could be fished close to the shore. The natives fished from kayaks with hand-lines. The halibut were cut into strips, which were dried for winter consumption. In 1908 the Royal Greenland Trading Company started buying halibut in Holsteinsborg. The halibut were cut up and salted in barrels for export. In order to develop the halibut fishery two Danish fishermen were sent to Holsteinsborg in 1910. One of them had formerly been engaged in halibut and cod fishery with American schooners off Newfoundland. He got a motorboat at his disposal in order that he could tow the Greenlandic boats to the fishing grounds and besides this he could transport salt and barrels to the places where the Greenlanders got the best catches of halibut. The most important task however was to teach the Greenlanders in fishing with long-lines from dorys. Dorys and long-lines could be bought on very favourable terms of payment. In the course of some few years many Greenlanders bought dorys and gears and participated in the fishery. Five to nine dorys could daily be towed to the fishing grounds. But only four dorys were towed to more distant fishing grounds situated about 15 to 20 miles from the coast. In 1911 preliminary fishing experiments for halibut were started at Agto (67° 56'N, 53°30'W) and at Kangamiut (65°50'N, 53°10'W) and during the following years a commercial halibut fishery developed gradually. The halibut was cut into pieces or fileted and salted in barrels. The fishing method used with dorys and a comparatively small motorboat as mothership was often dangerous but in the period of years the fishery was carried out no lives were lost.

In 1923 a new fishing method was introduced at Holsteinsborg, the lines were laid out and drawn directly by the motorboats, which were equipped with line shooters and line haulers, but in accordance with the wishes of the natives, some of their boats were still towed to the fishing places where they fished with their own gears.

In 1924 and 1925 a schooner on 76 tons and with an engine on 40 h.p. was used as mothership for eight dorys with 24 fishermen at Holsteinsborg. Besides this the fishery from motorboats and dorys was carried out as in the years before. In the same year a plant was built in Holsteinsborg for production of canned halibut. In 1926 two new motorboats were used in the fishery instead of the schooner. The halibut fishery was then carried out with four motorboats from Holsteinsborg, one from Agto and two from Kangamiut until 1928 in which year a private motorboat owned by Greenlanders participated in the fishery. The catches of halibut from Kangamiut were transported to the plant in Holsteinsborg. In the following years the output of the fishery decreased. The number of halibut on offshore and inshore fishing grounds diminished year by year and at the same time the size of the fish caught grew smaller and smaller. The natives' interest in halibut fishing diminished, and several of the Greenlanders gave up this fishing for the benefit of cod fishing which with the increasing occurrence of cod could be carried out with advantage and with lesser dangerous and hard work and cheaper gear than the halibut fishery. The halibut fishery stopped in 1929 in Agto. In Holsteinsborg it was continued with four motorboats until 1933. In 1934 only one motorboat fished for halibut and in the following year no fishing was carried out owing to few and small fish. In 1936, 1938 and 1939 fishing experiments were made with a single boat. The fishery was unprofitable owing to poor occurrence and small sized fish. The halibut fishery at

Kangamiut was carried out from two motorboats with very poor results until 1939. During the last part of the season 1939 the fishery was stopped owing to the fact that it was impossible to man the motorboats.

After the war an experiment with long-line fishing for halibut was carried out southwest of the Disko Island in 1947. In 1950 the freezing ship "Greenland" was sent to Godhavn and from August to October about 48.5 tons halibut were fished from small private Greenland motorboats and delivered to the freezing ship. In 1951 the amount of fresh halibut for freezing delivered by Greenland fishermen amounted to about 114 tons at Godhavn. In 1952 the fishery totally failed at Godhavn. In Sukkertoppen district about 73 tons halibut were fished, and in 1953 only 68 tons were taken in Sukkertoppen, Holsteinsborg and Egedesminde districts. In the last years halibut fishing has been carried out in Julianehåb district. The output was between 52 and 55 tons in 1954 and 1955. In 1956, 1957 and 1958 the output amounted to 30, 14 and 15 tons respectively.

The graph Figure 1 shows the output of the Greenlanders halibut fishery in the years from 1910 to 1939 and from 1950 to 1958. Until 1922 the output was very small, between 40 to 80 tons. In 1923 the output increased caused by the introduction of new fishing methods as mentioned above. The increase continued until it reached a peak in 1926 when about 285 tons were caught. Then a heavy decrease came which continued in the following years. From 1934 the plant in Holsteinsborg changed the production to canning of shrimps. Unfortunately we have no information about the catch per unit of gear, but from the reports we have some information about the sizes of fish caught in different periods. From 1914 to 1920 the mean-weight of halibut fished was from about 25 to 30 kg. From 1923 to 1931 the mean-weight was between 15 and 20 kg. From 1932 to 1936, it was from about nine to 15 kg, and from 1937 to 1939 it was only from 7 to 8 kg. Unfortunately we have not received information about the sizes of halibut in the years after the war.

In Figure 2 is given the relation between length and weight of halibut.

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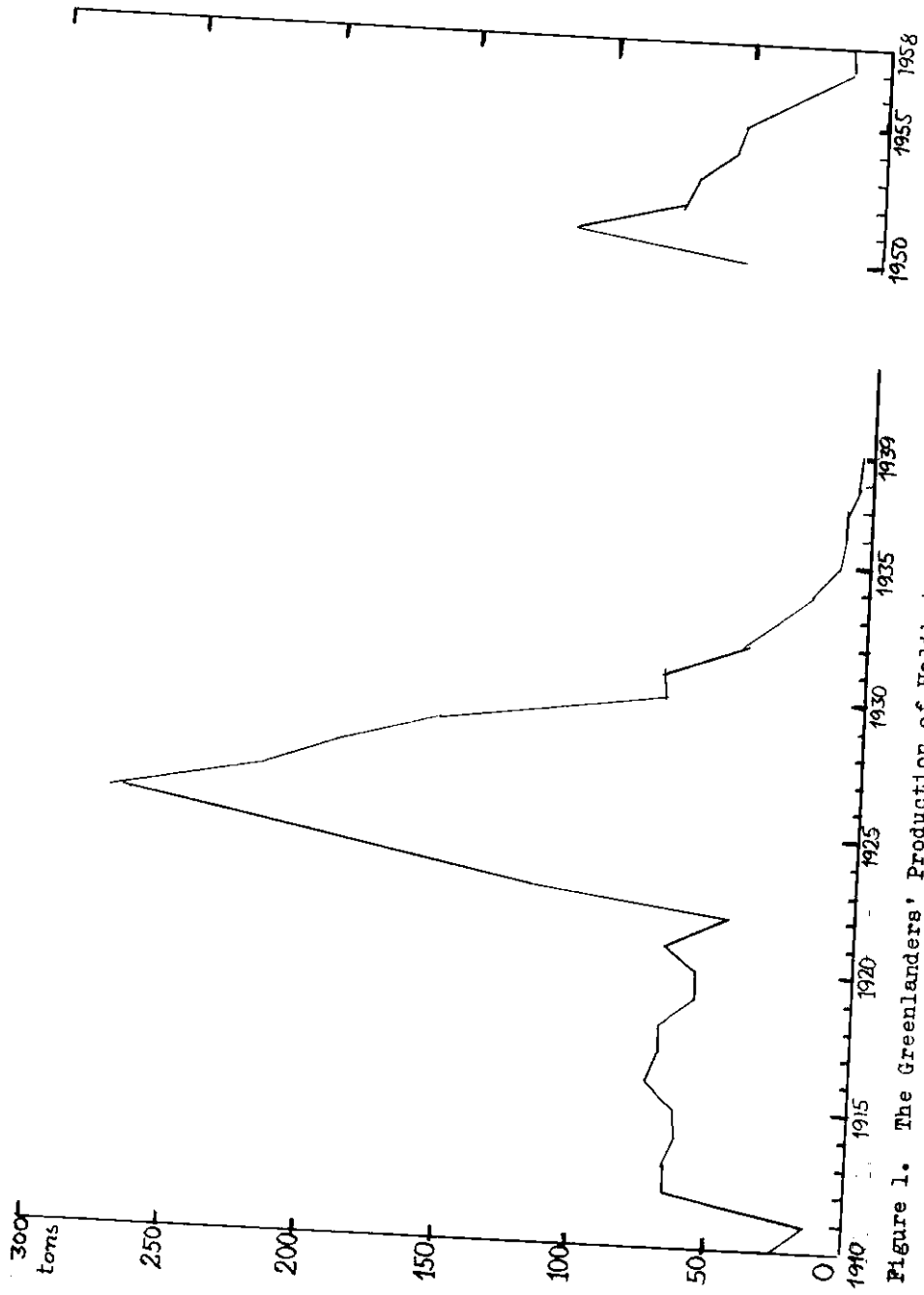


Figure 1. The Greenlanders' Production of Halibut.

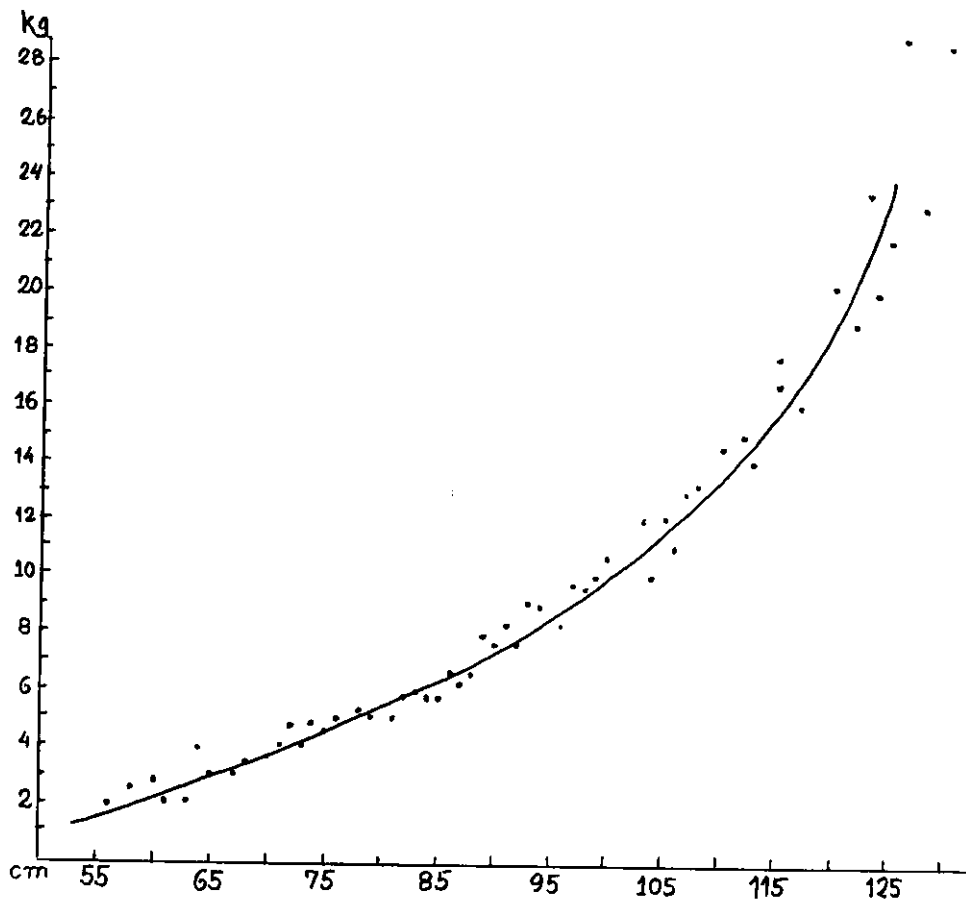


Figure 2. The relation between length and weight for halibut (West Greenland, Kangamiut), 1937, 379 specimens.