

They're "Riding Herd" on Blackfish Again At Cape as Price of Valuable Oil Soars



TRAPPED BY TIDE, THESE COUSINS OF THE WHALE MET DEATH ON BEACH

Special Dispatch to the Globe

ORLEANS, July 26—Fishermen are "riding herd" on the blackfish again. And that means that instead of chasing off these huge fish from Cape Cod bay shores, fishermen are out beating the waters trying to drive them on the beach, there to extract valuable oil from their heads.

For the past two decades, blackfish, huge first cousins to the whale, have been a downright nuisance on Cape Cod bay shores. Literally committing suicide as they chased small food fish into shallow flats, they gasped out their lives in the hot Summer sun. And then the boards of health had to step in and dispose of the remains.

Now, however, the price of blackfish oil has risen to around \$3 per gallon, and, at this figure, nets a neat profit to the small crew of Orleans men who engage to remove the "melors" from blackfish heads. It is in these "melors," extracted from the brain, that the high quality oil is found.

So far this season probably 400 blackfish have been "tapped" on Orleans and Eastham shores, and the season has only begun. It is a mid-Summer season, and confined largely to the southeast corner of Cape Cod Bay, a section fatal to blackfish from time immemorial.

Indians Did It, Too

Pilgrims observed Indians cutting up blackfish on Cape Cod bay

shores, and called the section in Eastham where they saw the strange sight, Grampus Bay. One little creek in Eastham to this day bears the name of Blackfish Creek.

"Why do they do this?" is the query of every Summer visitor, rushing to Eastham and Orleans shores in Summer to see the odd sight of from a dozen to hundreds of huge blackfish, their skins shiny as patent leather, gasping out their lives on sand flats. It is simply a case of instinct going wrong. They chase their prospective dinners, squid, herring, whiting and other small fish into shallow waters. The tide recedes before the blackfish can turn around and get clear, as a rule. Then they are stranded and die.

Until recent years, blackfish provided Cape Codders with many extra dollars. They are full of oil, and the "melor" in the head is only a part. Their bodies are made up of a heavy cushion of blubber which is tried out exactly as whales in times past. But with low oil prices, it wasn't worth the bother.

In the past two decades, Eastham and Orleans health authorities have spent hundreds of dollars burying schools of blackfish. It is an expense which the town board of health must bear, but chargeable to the county. Thus Barnstable County in recent years has records full of such items as: "To Town of Eastham, for burying blackfish, \$250."

Oil Prices Up This Year

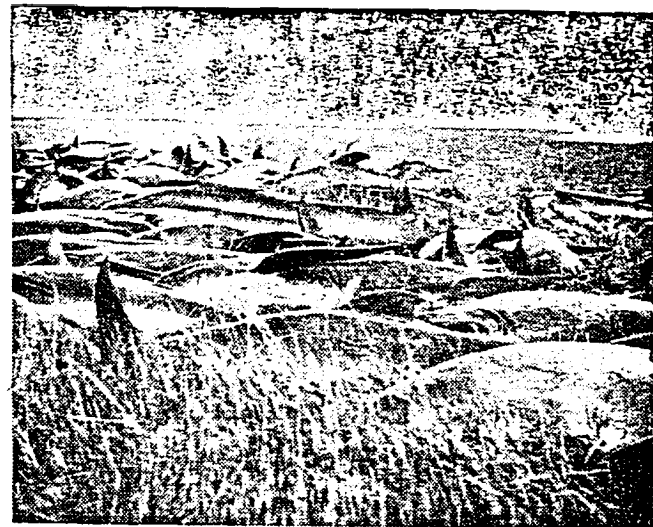
Oil prices this year have turned

1880's. About 2000 of the fish came ashore in one school.

Blackfish of course are not a true fish, but "cetaceous mammals of the whale family." Thoreau, making his trip down Cape Cod in 1849 recorded seeing a stranded school. With customary inquisitiveness he looked into zoological surveys made

baby blackfish gets caught with the herd, its cries are like those of a tiny child in pain.

Blackfish run up to 30 feet in length and a weight of two tons. Their heads usually yield about one gallon of oil, but yields of two or three gallons have been recorded. The jaw when tried out also yields



A HERD OF THE STRANDED MAMMALS

by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts and found that blackfish had been omitted from reports on fish because they are not a fish, and omitted from the report on mammals because they had not been investigated. "I thought it very remarkable. . . ." Thoreau wrote.

Thoreau gave the blackfish names as "the social whale, globicephalus melas, also called black whale-fish, howling whale, bottle-head, etc."

When the fishermen "ride herd" the scene is unforgettable. The blackfish, stranded in the flats, make a sound like a steamer's propellers thrashing out of water. A few minutes of wild lashing of tails, with spouting of blood, and the big mammals are quiet, save for an occasional frenzy. When the rare

the fine quality oil. The fish greatly resembles a baby whale, and has tiny slits for eyes and a hole in the head for breathing.

the tide. A quartet of Orleans men, Joe Brown, former mate on a Provincetown whaler, and the Baker brothers, Carl, Alwyn and Warren, have gone black fishing in earnest. They have chased several schools into the flats. Only this week they nabbed 73 on Eastham shores.

An oil firm in New Bedford is the purchaser, and the \$3 per gallon price, is for "melons" delivered. The oil, when refined, brings a much higher price, and is used for the most delicate instruments.

Blackfish schools this year have been smaller than in the past. The record Cape haul was along in the