

PORPOISE-SHOOTING.



PORPOISE-SHOOTING affords to the Indians of the Passamaquoddy tribe their principal means of support. It is practised at all seasons of the year, but the fish killed in the winter are the fattest, and give the largest quantities of oil. The largest-sized porpoises measure about seven feet in length, about the girth five feet, weight 300 lbs. and upwards, and yield from six to seven gallons of oil. The blubber is about one and one-half inch thick in summer, and two inches thick in winter, at which time the creature is in its best condition. The blubber from a large porpoise weighs about 100 lbs. The Indians try out the oil in a very primitive manner, and with very rude but picturesque appliances. The blubber is stripped off, then cut into small pieces, which are placed in a huge iron pot and melted over a fire.

All along the beach were placed, at intervals, curious structures consisting of two upright pieces of wood, surmounted by a cross-piece, from which the pots were hung by chains. Under this cross-piece large stones were piled in a semi-circle, inside of which a fire was made, that was allowed to burn fiercely until the stones were at a white heat. The fire was then scattered, and the pots containing the blubber were placed under the stones, and just enough fire under them to insure the melting of the blubber. When melted the oil was skimmed off into other receptacles, then poured into tin cans of about five gallons capacity, and the process was complete. If the oil is pure it readily brings 90 cents per gallon, but if adulterated with seal or any other inferior oil, its value is reduced to 65 cents per gallon.

A very superior oil is obtained from the jaw of the porpoise. The jaws are hung up in the sun, and the oil as it drips is caught in cans placed for that purpose. The quantity of oil thus produced is small, being only half a pint from each jaw, but a large price is paid for it by watchmakers and others requiring a very fine lubricator. The oil from the blubber gives a very good light, and was for a long time used in all lighthouses on the coast. It is also a capital oil for lubricating machinery, never gets sticky, and is unaffected by cold weather. When pure there is no offensive smell, and I know of no oil equal to it for those who are compelled to use their eyes at night. The light is very soft, and when used in a German student's lamp one can work almost as comfortably as by daylight, and the dreaded glare of gas and other artificial lights is completely avoided.

If industrious and favoured with ordinary success, an Indian can kill 150 or 200 porpoises a year, and they will average three gallons of oil each. But, unfortunately, the poor Indians are not so industrious, or only so by fits and starts, or as necessity compels them. Their way is usually to accumulate some fifteen or twenty gallons of oil, then go off to Eastport, Maine, with it for market. Thus much time is lost in loitering about the towns, and in going and returning from the hunting grounds. Moreover, there are always two Indians to each canoe, and the proceeds of the hunt have to be divided. There is quite a demand for the oil, and if systematically followed, porpoise-shooting would afford the Indians a comfortable support.

The flesh of the porpoise when cooked is not unlike fresh pork, and at one time was much used.