

PROGRESS OF THE DISCOVERY COMMITTEE'S INVESTIGATIONS

by

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The publication of a *Report on the Progress of the Discovery Committee's Investigations* (Discovery Committee, Colonial Office, June 1937) provides a suitable occasion to review briefly the achievements of the last twelve years.

The main purpose of the investigations has been "to carry out research on the economic resources of the Falkland Islands Dependencies", which reduces primarily to a study of the biology of the Antarctic whales. Before the effect of whaling on the stock of whales can be assessed, or measures for the regulation of the industry suggested, it has been necessary to elicit as much information as possible about the breeding and growth, and the distribution, movements and migrations of the species of whales which are hunted. To do this the Discovery Committee's investigations have covered a far wider field than that afforded by direct observations on the living whales or on their carcasses, for the habits of whales are intimately bound up with the whole economy of oceanic life.

Other observations of economic importance, but not concerned with whales, have been pursued on a smaller scale. These include experimental trawling on the banks between the Falkland Islands and South America to test the possibility of establishing fisheries in the area, investigations concerning seals, and the surveying of imperfectly charted coasts and islands. Though the main objective in the Antarctic has been the elucidation of economic problems, the vessels have had unrivalled opportunities for research in pure science. This research has always been encouraged when it could be performed without interference with the routine investigations.

Such has been the plan behind the work, and now as to what has been achieved. The results, as measured by the printed word, are represented by fourteen large volumes, comprising some eighty memoirs, by more than fifty authors. Of these papers, thirty-two may be looked upon as having some obvious bearing on economic problems, being concerned with Whales (6), Seals (2), and Plankton (13), Survey (4), Hydrology (6) and Fish (1). To deal with the whales alone, it is due entirely to the Discovery Investigations that such essential information has now been obtained as that the great whales reach sexual maturity in two years from birth, that physical growth ceases by the age of seven, and that the female whales, at the best, can bear a young one in alternate years. There was, however, for some years a serious disappointment in the virtual failure of all attempts at marking whales with metal darts. The failure of this important portion of the work was most unfortunate, but the difficulties happily have now been overcome and more than four thousand whales have been marked and recoveries are coming in.

Even had they achieved nothing more at this stage of the work, the new knowledge of the Antarctic whales is ample return for all the efforts made. The primary work of the scientists is now approaching its conclusion: they are, and this is the important point, providing a factual basis for a considered long-term plan for the conservation and efficient utilisation of the whale stock. "Fears concerning the depletion of the whale stock were widely entertained when the investigations were planned" but have now become "far more grave".

To-day it is the turn for public opinion and the statesmen of the world to enforce measures that will save the southern fishery from the fate which has overtaken all earlier whaling in the north. Recent efforts have resulted in an agreement between the whaling countries, other than Japan, but there can be few who see any real prospect of ultimate success.

