

Open Atlantic

NOT "DESERT OF LIFE"

Except for the distant spout of a whale and the occasional flights of flying fishes, few if any other signs of marine life are observed from a ship crossing the Atlantic Ocean. It was generally believed that the open Atlantic was a desert of life until Frank J. Mather III, biologist on our staff, started to troll fishing lines from our research vessels. The results have been astonishing. They show that the "desert of life" theory is open to question, to state it mildly (says Oceanus, Journal of the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution of Massachusetts).

During three years of part-time fishing on the open sea, Mr. Mather, other scientists and crew members of our ships captured 225 game fishes such as tuna, blue and white marlin, mackerel-like

white marlin, mackerel-like fishes, dolphins, amberpacks, and barracuda. Some rare and little-known fishes such as the snake mackerel were also caught. In addition they lost one hundred or more fish and obtained sight records of over 3,000 large animals. In size the catches ranged from an 8ft. 2in. blue marlin to an 11½ inch bluefin tuna. Though a sports fisherman might have thrown that little fellow overboard in disgust, to Mather the catch was both interesting and important since fewer than a dozen bluefins of that size were known to have been caught in the western North Atlantic. Since then Mather has caught five more. Actually these fishes, judged to be the young of the year, must be extremely numerous.

The smallest catches consisted of a ¼-inch swordfish and several skipjacks about ½ inch long. These were taken by towing a silk plankton net at the surface of the sea in an effort to find the spawning areas of oceanic fishes.

ing areas of oceanic fishes.
Although the number of fishes caught may appear small, it must be borne in mind that the work was done entirely as part-time voluntary activity. Regular ship-board duties continued and at no time could the course of the ship be changed from its primary mission.

The fishing was not always successful; "the big ones got away." Occasionally the heaviest lines were broken and large hooks were straightened out. Once a heavy coiled spring, 2 ins. in diameter, which was used as a shock absorber, was stretched out straight into a 10ft. piece of wire. Oceanographic instruments were often attacked by unknown assailants. A metal, 35 lb. instrument was almost bitten

in two and others showed evidence on their recording apparatus of having hit large objects while being towed.

Further evidence of the existence of large forms of life has come from high-speed plankton samplers

speed plankton samplers.
These instruments, consisting
of hollow brass tubes, are
towed at high speed below
the surface. Not infrequently
the samples contain a neat
"core" from an unhappy and
unidentified fish.