

CUBAN SPONGES SCRUB WORLD

Sponge Fishing in Cuba's Gulf of Batabanó (1890-1940)

Abstract: Before the invention of the artificial sponge, sea sponges were an industrial and household necessity throughout the United States and Europe, where they were put to purposes ranging from surgery to automobile manufacturing and military maintenance. As industrial demand grew, sponges from the Cuba's shallow coastal waters became a crucial supplier. Most of the Cuban industry centered around the town of Surgidero de Batabanó, a small southern fishing village that became the hub for the marine industry. New York sponge merchants became dependent on Batabanó's sponges to meet U.S. demand. In turn, conditions of life and labor in Batabanó became inextricably tied to the fluctuations of U.S. industrial markets. While sea sponges were Cuba's largest marine export for decades, the once-enormous industry has not yet attracted the attention of Cuban or foreign historians. This article fills this gap by tracing the local, national, and transnational histories of Cuban sea sponge fishing, regulation, and trade.

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Until the mid-19th century, residents of the Cuban town of Surgidero de Batabanó thought little of the millions of sea sponges that dotted the waters of the vast, shallow gulf with which the town shared a name. Food fish were plentiful, and no one had much use for more than a few sponges at a time. But around the 1860s, sponges shifted from being one ecological element of the many that made up the Gulf's shallow benthic ecosystems to become a massive export commodity whose commercial value was exceeded only by Cuba's most dominant cash crops. Commercial sponge fishing transformed the economy and ecology of the region. By the early 20th century, Surgidero de Batabanó—known to most simply as Batabanó—had become a global hub for sponge fishing and export. Demand from the United States and Europe for Cuban sponges increased steadily from 1890 through the middle of the 20th century, when the introduction of the artificial sponge would abruptly end Batabanó's near-century of wealth and cultural importance.

Sponge fishing created a human-ecological relationship predicated on a uniquely abundant marine resource and intimate human knowledge of the geography and ecology of the surrounding Gulf. Working in pairs, fishers would dip a glass-bottomed bucket in the sea to scan for the best specimens. With the help of a long rake, they would rip the sponges off of the sea floor, moving systematically across each bed. Decks piled high with sponges, the sponging boats would return to the docks of Batabanó and unload their harvest. These sponges were dark-colored, slimy, potent-smelling specimens, and the air would fill with the smell of the living sponges—the simple animals occupying the soft, valuable spongin skeletons—rotting on the docks. After drying for several days, the sponges would be trimmed, processed, strung-up and sold, auction-style, to the sponge merchant offering the highest price.

These merchants—some longtime residents, others recent Greek and Mallorcan immigrants—served as the brokers between the Gulf of Batabanó's heterogeneous, locally-situated ecological resource and the demand for a standardized product that emanated from the manufacturers and sponge dealers of France, Great Britain, and especially the United States. To many contemporary observers, both Cuban and American, Batabanó's sponging economy appeared as a quaint, localized curiosity, a peculiar feature of Cuba's southern coast. This perception of quaintness stemmed partially from the low-capital, decentralized character of the industry throughout its duration, and partially from foreigners' preexisting expectations of Cuban economic and cultural activity. The Cuban sponging industry exemplifies what sociologist Mimi Sheller argues are the dual "modes of consumption" of the Caribbean, a framework of consumption that encompasses "not only flows of material things [...] but also of symbolic representations, knowledge and images."¹ The constructed quaintness of Batabanó sponging allowed American audiences to culturally consume sponges as part of a "politics of the picturesque," wherein travel writers and journalists used sponging to construct an image of an abundant, undeveloped, and "othered" Cuba.²

But the hyper-local, capital-light aspects of the sponging industry and the resulting projected quaintness masked the inextricable ties between the rise in Cuban sponging and the growth in U.S. industrialization and manufacturing. In the 19th century, sea sponges were used primarily for cleaning, contraception, bathing, and art. But in the 20th century, the paint, explosives, and automobile industries—not domestic needs—drove the increased demand for sponges.³ These unique demands of a modernizing United States pushed the Cuban industry towards overproduction and ecological precarity. Unlike the mass agricultural monocultures

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(bananas, sugar, tobacco, etc.) that have usually attracted the attention of historians studying U.S. economic influence in Latin America, the Batabanó sponge fishery could not be expanded beyond the capacity of the uniquely abundant sponge beds endemic to the Gulf.⁴ Despite—or perhaps because of—this local specificity and these natural limits, Batabanó sponging formed a crucial node in the regional supply chains that fueled U.S. industrialization and manufacturing. Through studying the economic ties between Cuba and the U.S. created by the shipments of Batabanó's best, as well as examining the cultural ties formed via sponges between Cuba and the increasingly internationalist “Western” nations, this essay aims to broaden understandings of U.S. economic imperialism as well as Cuban environmental history.

In recounting the history of the Batabanó sponge fishery, this paper seeks to make three broader historiographical contributions, commenting on: marine environments, U.S. economic imperialism in Latin America, and Cuban economic and environmental history. First, the focus on marine industry in the Caribbean helps broaden the geographic scope of current marine environmental history. It also expands the smaller collection of work on the history of sponging by providing the first historiographical study of the Cuban case. Second, this case study of an extractive industry that remained unindustrialized and locally-managed even as it exported massive quantities of resources pushes historians who study the effects of U.S. resource demand on Latin American environments to see these smaller, locally-constrained sites of production as key nodes in the historical supply chains of U.S. economic imperialism. Third and finally, a history of Cuban fishing in a specific coastal region diversifies the focus on national politics and agricultural commodities that guide much of the foreign scholarship on pre-Revolutionary Cuba. Though Batabanó's sponge fishery appeared to be a marginal local economy, the industry served as a major supplier for U.S. consumers and manufacturers, resulting in a precarious, dynamic relationship between southern Cuba's local ecology and the United States' demand for and consumption of the sea sponge.

MARINE ENVIRONMENTAL HISTORY AND BATABANÓ'S SPONGE FISHERY

The earliest examples of marine environmental history were situated within the field of economic history and focused primarily on European fisheries and maritime technologies.⁵ In 1986, Arthur McEvoy's *The Fisherman's Problem: Ecology and the Law in California Fisheries, 1850–1980*, highlighted new directions for the field, and in the 1990s, several fisheries histories followed McEvoy's work.⁶ This period also saw the launch of the History of Marine Animal Populations project (HMAP), still one of the field's most ambitious initiatives. HMAP was intended to draw “history and ecology into collaborative study,” with an eye towards quantitative assessments of the historical abundance and distribution of

marine life.⁷ Through HMAP, marine environmental history turned to population reconstructions and cross-disciplinary studies between scientists and historians. These historical-ecological studies focused primarily on marine life in the waters around Europe, the U.S., and the South Pacific, though some studies of the Caribbean emerged.⁸ Today, marine environmental history remains a nascent subfield within the discipline of environmental history. However, perhaps due to its development in a time of near-constant ecological crisis, marine environmental history has refused to retreat into the detached realm of pure academic inquiry. Scholars in the field explicitly connect historical patterns to present concerns, creating arguments for historicizing the ocean based on the material contemporary stakes and state of crisis.

Though the historicity of the ocean is less obvious than that of other environments, this subtlety should not be mistaken for absence. This caution is particularly relevant when applied to historical sponge fisheries, as the current dominance of artificial substitutes makes it hard for present-day audiences to grasp the industry's enormous importance to early twentieth century Caribbean fishing communities and global consumption. The absence of a booming contemporary sponge trade should not be taken to indicate the industry's historical triviality. Indeed, several historical-ecological projects have reconstructed the impact and character of the sponging industries in Tarpon Springs and Key West, Florida, most notably Loren McClenahan's “Social Conflict, Over-Fishing and Disease in the Florida Sponge Fishery, 1849-1939.”⁹ In the Mediterranean, several historians have recorded the long history of commercial sponging on various Greek islands.¹⁰ Yet, the story of Cuban sponging remains untraced. This article aims to contribute to the growing conversation on marine environmental history by filling in this crucial missing link in the story of Caribbean sponging.

CARIBBEAN SPONGING: REGIONAL CONTEXT

While today sponging is best known as a mainstay of Tarpon Springs, the Caribbean sponging industry first developed in the Bahamas, arriving in Key West only with the migration of Bahamian sponge fishers. The Bahamian sponging industry was established in the late 1830s, while Florida did not export its first sponge until 1849.¹¹ Frustrated with the low wages and exploitative labor conditions set by white merchants and ship owners, many experienced black Bahamian spongers moved to Key West in the 1840s and established the early Key West sponging industry.¹² In the second half of the 19th century, declines in key Bahamian industries like sisal and pineapple farming pushed more Bahamians toward the Florida Keys. By 1890, Bahamians made up 25% of the population of Key West, and the majority of its 2000 spongers.¹³ At the same time, rising prices for Mediterranean sponges increased demand for Florida's products, and Key West merchants began to see sponges as a proto-commodity.

A strong trade developed between the merchants of Key West and the sponge dealers of New York City in the second half of the 19th century. The New York sponge houses, already accustomed to importing Mediterranean sponges, used their established grading systems to organize, evaluate, and standardize the new Caribbean specimens. They incorporated exportation into their previously import-focused businesses.¹⁴ Further, they began to make demands on the Key West merchants: for certain sizes of sponges, for certain types—the sheepswool sponge was particularly valuable—and for ever-increasing quantities. Demand was enormous. Larger sponges were crucial for cleaning, bathing, and manufacturing, while smaller sponges and clippings were used for packaging or for stuffing mattresses and cushions.¹⁵ One merchant remarked to a Bureau of Commercial Fisheries (BCF) official that the demand for high-quality Florida sponges was ten times greater than he could supply.¹⁶ Yet, even as the sponge dealers pressed the Key West merchants for more shipments, they complained that Florida buyers had begun to “top off” bales of small sponges with more-valuable larger ones.¹⁷ This commercial fraud also concealed a larger ecological problem in the sponging industry—an increasing inability to find large sponges, one of the key signs of overfishing.

In a story common to many histories of fisheries, a perceived abundance quickly gave way to sharp, unmistakable declines in sponge populations. As McClenachan writes, spongers in

the 19th century, both in the Florida Keys and in a developing secondary sponging hub near Apalachicola, practiced a sort of “unintentional conservation”: the common methods of hand- or rake-harvesting inherently limited the intensity and depth of sponging efforts.¹⁸ Despite these limits, many of the shallowest sponge beds were depleted quickly, pushing sponge fishers into a constant—if unsystematic—search for new beds. In the 1870s, the sponge fishers hit a jackpot: a second major set of sponge beds off Florida’s Gulf coast, near the Cedar Keys. The Tarpon Springs sponging industry, which would soon dwarf Key West’s contributions, began to take shape.¹⁹ In 1887, a BCF official noted that although sponge sizes were marginally decreasing, overall yields remained relatively constant due to the consistent discovery and exploitation of new beds.²⁰ Despite these foreboding signs for the overall regional stock, the Tarpon Springs sponging boom continued through the turn of the 20th century, attracting a new wave of immigrants to the Gulf coast: the Greeks.

The arrival of the Greek sponge divers and merchants fundamentally shifted the cultural and ecological dynamics of the Florida sponging industry. According to several histories of the early industry, John M. Cocoris was the first Greek immigrant involved in Tarpon Springs’ sponging.²¹ Cocoris arrived in Tarpon Springs as an agent with the New York-based Lembesis Sponge Company, and he quickly saw the potential profit in technological modernization.



“Sponge Fishermen, Bahamas” (1885)
Source: Winslow Homer (Wikimedia Commons)

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In 1901 and 1902, he brought over three of his brothers from Greece—all with experience in their family’s sponge business on Hydra—as well as an import that would change the entire Florida sponging industry: diving gear. With diving equipment, an entire sponge bed could be harvested systematically, and depth limits increased enormously. With the “hooking” technique, harvesters could reach sponges at depths of no more than 40 feet (12 m). Trained sponge divers could harvest sponges at 90 to 120 feet (25-30 m).²² Previously inaccessible sponge beds became sources for the finest quality sponges as the shallow beds continued to decline. From 1902 to 1906, the Cocorises built a half-dozen diving boats and brought dozens of crewmembers and divers from Greece.²³ More Greek sponge divers emigrated to the region, and diving quickly threatened to become the dominant form of sponging. The older hand-raking method just could not compete. The Greek spongers began to displace other Floridians, who pushed their elected officials to defend the industry against this technological rupture.

Fears of overfishing became inextricably linked to animosity toward Greek sponge fishers, and the American sponge fishers turned to the legal system to confront these twin threats. The American sponge fishers found their most vocal champion in U.S. Congressman Stephen Sparkman. Sparkman, a Democrat, served as one of Florida’s congressmen from 1895 to 1917, the same period that saw the powerful effect of Greek migration.²⁴ In April 1906, Sparkman testified before Congress on the national need to protect the Florida sponge industry from sharp price decreases and overfishing.²⁵ Sparkman had introduced two bills on sponge conservation, and he defended both vigorously. One bill sought to ban diving methods; the other bill sought to ban all Greeks from the industry. When questioned about the necessity of both laws—surely, the committee members argued, the diving prohibition alone would be enough to protect sponge stocks—Sparkman held firm. Both bills were necessary to

both massive industries by the early 20th century. A 1908 U.S. federal report recorded annual Bahamian exports of 1,486,000 pounds of sponges in 1905, and annual Cuban exports of 591,000 pounds of sponges in 1906.²⁸ For comparison, in 1906 the combined Floridian beds produced 518,000 pounds—less, by volume, than either of the state’s neighbors.²⁹ As Sparkman was in Washington testifying to Congress about the unique regional importance of Florida’s sponge industry, the Cuban and Bahamian industries were booming. And despite the massive aggregate output of the Cuban and Bahamian sponge fisheries, neither the Bahamas nor Cuba ever saw the introduction of the sponge diving technologies that transformed the Florida industry. In both Cuba and the Bahamas, the fishing methods and labor structures surrounding sponging remained remarkably constant despite the industrialization that marked other export-oriented industries at the turn of the 20th century.³⁰

While the Cuban sponge fishery remained a predominantly locally-managed and low-capital network of Cuban fishermen and buyers, the fishery was inextricably tied to the growing demand from a rapidly-industrializing class of U.S. consumers and manufacturers. Cuba exported less than half as many sponges as the Bahamas in the early 1900s, but Cuban sponging was vital for both the Cuban export economy and for U.S. manufacturers. And unlike in the Bahamas, where sponging was spread across multiple towns and islands, Cuban sponging became increasingly centered around Batabanó. The town would become a “sponge capital of the world,” both real and imagined, up until and even beyond the industry’s eventual decline at mid-century.

THE CUBAN CASE: SPONGE FISHING, EXPORTING, AND CUBAN INTERNATIONALISM

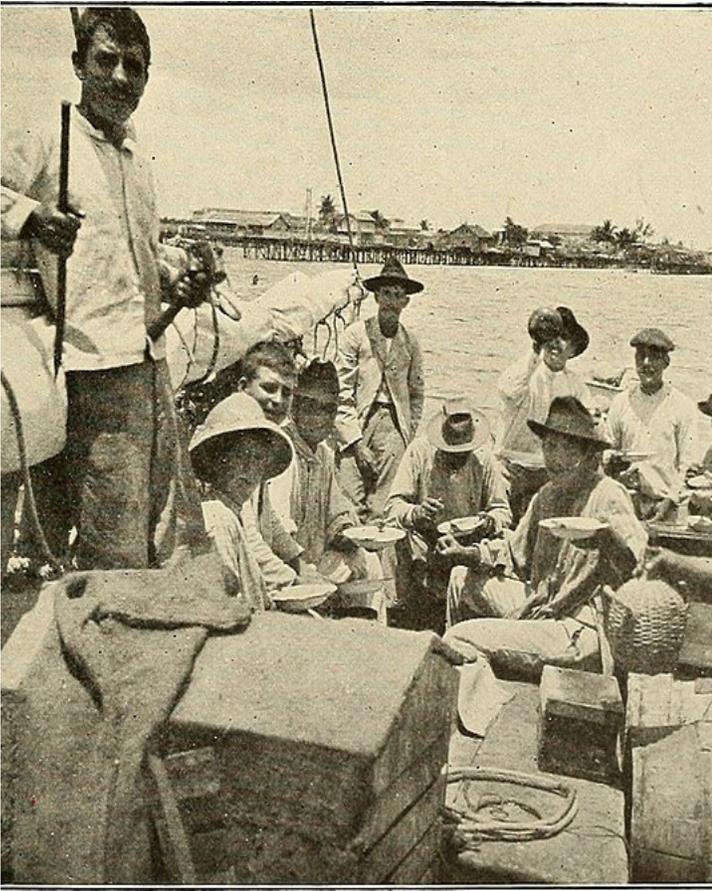
Unlike the somewhat clear origin stories of commercial sponging in the Bahamas and Florida, the early development of commercial Cuban sponging remains a murky story.

“Fears of overfishing became inextricably linked to animosity toward Greek sponge fishers...”

protect the American spongers. Overfishing concerns could not be separated from fear of the Greek spongers. Sparkman cautioned that without some form of legislation, Florida’s sponges would be “threatened with extermination.”²⁶ And if Florida’s sponges disappeared, Sparkman warned, this would be a devastating blow to global and especially Caribbean sponging.²⁷ The Florida beds had to be defended vigorously, Sparkman argued, for they were the only truly productive sponge beds in the Caribbean.

Sparkman’s assertion was personally convenient, but inaccurate. Bahamian and Cuban sponge fishing were

The northern sponge beds in the shallow waters between Cardenas and Nuevitas were exploited first, primarily by traveling Bahamian sponge fishers.³¹ The Batabanó sponging grounds, which eventually outstripped production from the northern coast, were not exploited until late in the 19th century, though the exact date is unclear. A 1911 bulletin from the Pan American Union dates the fishery’s origins to 1844.³² In sharp contrast, a U.S. government report states that the Batabanó sponge beds were discovered in 1884, when “an attempt was made to secure a concession monopolizing the exploitation of the beds.” (The attempt failed. The sponge beds would remain in the public commons throughout the



Cuban Sponge Fishers (circa 1904)
 Source: *The Cuba Review*, Munson Steamship Lines
 (Wikimedia Commons)

fishery's existence.)³³ An 1887 assessment of the sponge fisheries in Florida and the Bahamas remarked on the fraudulent practice of substituting Cuban sheep's-wool sponges for Floridian ones, but gave the Cuban fisheries no further comment. Cuban scientist Mario Sánchez Roig placed the date of Batabanó's commercialization at 1865, though he caveated that the northern beds far outstripped Batabanó's production for several decades.³⁴ In December 1884, New Orleans' *The Daily Picayune* commented that "business has been very dull at the Batabano Sponge Market" due to the holiday lull, suggesting the market had been established several years prior.³⁵

Despite these discrepancies, various sources—Cuban and foreign—agree that by the 1890s, sponging was a significant industry in Batabanó.³⁶ Meanwhile, sponge farming (*esponjicultura*) was garnering increased interest at sites along the northern coast.³⁷ Statistical information on Cuban sponging improved in the 1890s as U.S. reports and trade notices provided increasingly detailed information on Batabanó's sponge exports.³⁸ This increasing U.S. interest in the industry reflected both the growing economic value of Cuban sponging and the broader escalation of U.S. interest in Cuba in the years leading up to the Spanish American War in 1898.

The Spanish American War and the U.S. occupation of Cuba transformed the relationship between the neighboring nations. The town of Batabanó would both contribute to this transformation and experience its effects in unique ways. During the War itself, the Isle of Pines and the port of Batabanó served as key entry points for the Spanish ships and supplies that would undermine the U.S. blockade of Havana.³⁹ After the War, the U.S. military government established the regulatory framework that would govern sponge fishing in Batabanó for the next decade and influence conservation policy throughout the fishery's existence.⁴⁰ In addition, the military government also collected detailed statistics on all Cuban industries and exports, including sponge production. The U.S. War Department produced monthly reports on Cuban commerce throughout the three-year Occupation; these reports showed that exports of sponges dwarfed those of rum at the turn of the century.⁴¹ Such networks of statistical collection and dissemination strengthened the foundation for national record-keeping and regulation of the industry after U.S. forces left mainland Cuba.

Here, I specify mainland Cuba because American expatriates continued to occupy the Isle of Pines, Cuba's second largest island and the seventh largest in the Caribbean, until 1925. The Americans on the Isle of Pines never entered the sponging business, concerning themselves instead with agricultural pursuits and sport fishing. The Cuban sponge fishers predominantly lived across the gulf in Batabanó. However, the distinct communities met and mixed, both on the Isle and on the water. American residents of the Isle complained that Haitian and Jamaican sponge poachers would occasionally raid the Isle as well, using these incidents to express their frustration with Cuban authorities in Batabanó.⁴² At the same time, sponge boats docked in the Isle's Río Las Casas, and a rumor circulated that the sponge fishers might shift their base of operations to the Isle.⁴³ As Michael Neagle emphasizes in his history of "America's Forgotten Colony," the relationship between the Cubans and Americans in the region defied a simple designation of either harmonious or antagonistic.⁴⁴ The Isle of Pines provides a particularly acute example of the continued American influence on Batabanó's sponge fishery after the U.S. Occupation ended in 1902. However, the Occupation shaped the industry's early 20th-century development through several less visible legacies as well.

In the first decade of the 20th century, Batabanó's sponge merchants worked within the political frameworks established by the U.S. military and the Cuban national government to expand their businesses and, by extension, the entire Batabanó sponging industry. At the beginning of the century, sponge fishing and processing employed hundreds of Batabanó's residents—perhaps as many as 2000 men, or 25% of Batabanó's male population, by 1910.⁴⁵ From longtime residents to a small class of Greek and Mallorcan immigrants, almost everyone in the town was tied to sponging in some

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way. But not everyone participated equally. Most fishers were not exclusively devoted to sponging, nor did they own the large sailboats needed for commercial-scale harvesting.⁴⁶ Instead, fishers would be hired out for sponging trips by boat owners, who would pay them in sponges. Then both fisher and captain would head to the sponge market, organize their catch by size and count, and sell it to the highest bidder in a market-auction system described by foreign commenters as more systematic than Florida's version.⁴⁷

At this link in the sponge economy, the number of participants would again contract as all the high-quality sponges were purchased by a small cadre of sponge merchants. The trade in sponges was entirely controlled by these men, many of them with growing ties to the New York sponge houses that received most of the Cuban product. Sponge merchants like Julian Quadreny, Javier Gardet, and Jorge Nicoletto became wealthy and powerful figures in Batabanó.⁴⁸ Through their control of purchasing and processing, the Batabanó sponge merchants ensured a consistent, standardized product for export while communicating and actualizing the increased production demanded by New York dealers within Batabanó. These men served as the crucial brokers between locally-situated ecosystems of production and growing foreign demand, and their individual efforts to maximize their profits enabled sponging's overall growth.

As the sponge trade expanded, the Cuban government began to take a deeper interest in sponge conservation and regulation. In doing so, officials leaned heavily on Occupation-era policies like Military Order 102, an 1899 regulation that established official grades of sponges and

Nacional de la Pesca's arguments and the Guild of Sponge Buyers' counterarguments bounced across the pages of Havana's *La Lucha* and *El Mundo*.⁵³ These conservation clashes rendered the divergent interests of regulators, fishers, and merchants acutely visible. Batabanó couldn't afford these bans, the Guild argued, as "the town of Batabanó lives only and exclusively on fishing."⁵⁴ The regulators countered with the familiar and enduring argument that the policies were in the best interest of both the fishers and the nation. Batabanó's sponging, despite its appearance as a localized, niche economy, had become a matter of national concern.

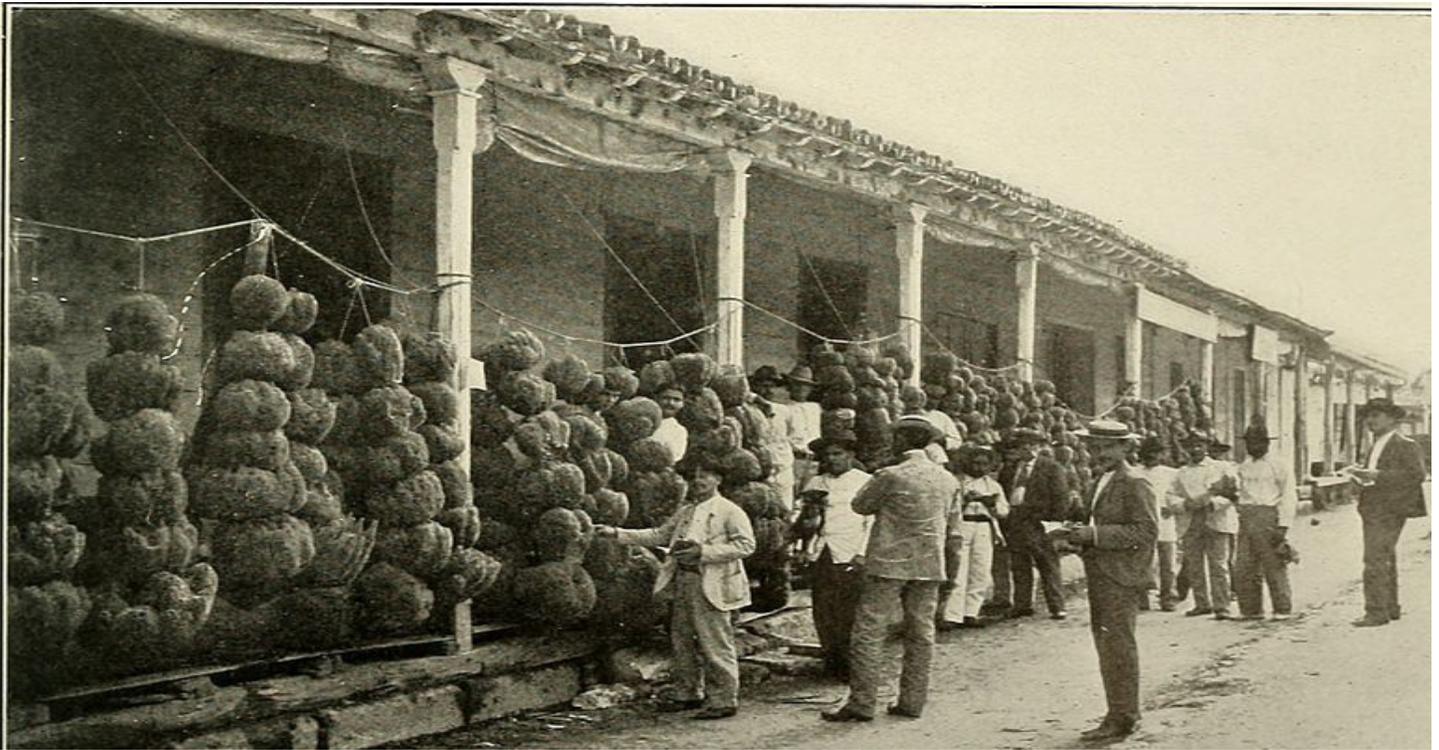
While these domestic debates unfolded, the national government began to use sponges as a tool for claiming space in the increasingly internationalist milieu of "modern" nations. Though no sponges appeared on exhibit lists for Spanish Cuba during the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition, by the 1901 Pan-American Exposition in Buffalo, sponges featured prominently in Cuba's exhibit. Batabanó merchants including Julian Quadreny and Jorge Nicoletto traveled to Buffalo to display their best sponges. (Both won honorable mentions).⁵⁵ Cuban representatives also brought sponges to the 1904 Louisiana Purchase Exposition in St. Louis and the 1915 Panama-Pacific International Exposition in San Francisco.⁵⁶ The space given to sponges never rivaled that of sugar or tobacco, but sponges were the key marine resource featured from the island nation. In St. Louis, Cuba's education exhibit also included an ecological investigation of sponges, as Cuban officials recognized that scientific self-knowledge had become another requirement for modern nations. Events like the International Fishery Congresses in Vienna (1905) and Washington, D.C. (1908) further demonstrated the growing

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created a partial-ban system in which alternating halves of the Gulf of Batabanó would be closed to sponging.⁴⁹ This policy seems to have loosely remained in place after the Occupation, despite the protests of the sponge fishers, who in 1910 traveled to the presidential Palacio in Havana to argue against the excess of the partial bans. They believed that size limits could adequately meet conservation goals.⁵⁰

However, it appears that even the alternating half-Gulf ban was not enough; by 1912, journalists and officials were sounding early alarms about overfishing in Havana's newspapers.⁵¹ In response, the national government instituted a closed season from March through May, to the enagement of sponge fishers and merchants—who, in a change of position, now argued that the alternating half-Gulf ban was the reasonable and optimal policy.⁵² The Junta

scientific internationalism of industrialized nations.⁵⁷ Cuba did not attend either conference, but Cuban officials tracked the proceedings carefully. The countries invited to participate in these conferences pleaded to places like Cuba with still-intact sponge beds to take sponge conservation more seriously than Greece had.⁵⁸ Sponge conservation was a key discussion topic at these conferences, and the increasing attention given to still-flourishing sponging areas meant Cuba and Cuban resources were discussed more seriously in the internationalist space, even as Cuban representatives were absent. At the turn of the century, Cuban representatives displayed sponges as a sign of the nation's tropical ecological heritage, while the Cuban government tracked industrialized nations' embrace of internationalism and leveraged Cuba's unique ecological resource to garner attention and respect in the international arena.



Sponge Market at Batabanó (1911)

Source: *The Cuba Review*, *Munson Steamship Lines* (Wikimedia Commons)

As Cuban sponges provided fodder for these national political projects, the sponge trade strengthened economic ties between Cuba and the United States. U.S. sponge dealers, pharmacists, manufacturers, and household consumers fueled an ever-growing demand for sponges, which led to the sponge price increases in Batabanó that incentivized overfishing.⁵⁹ Almost all U.S.-bound sponges from the Gulf of Batabanó went directly to New York, where the sponge houses collected and graded Batabanó's sponges and distributed them across the country or re-exported them across the Atlantic. In the early 19th century, these sponge houses specialized in importing Mediterranean sponges, but as the geographic loci of sponge production shifted west, so too did the dealers' specialties.⁶⁰ By 1919, many of the New York houses maintained agents in Cuba, including Juan Esfakis, a Greek immigrant who had become a key figure in the Batabanó trade.⁶¹ These sponge houses filled the demand generated by various users, including longtime sponge consumers: surgeons, artists, druggists, and the everyday bather, dishwasher, or toilet-scrubber.

But in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, a new industrial class supplanted these traditional consumers: automobile and explosives manufacturers, industrial painters, upholsterers, and even railroad interests drove the increased demand for Cuban, Floridian, and Bahamian sponges in the 20th century.⁶² In 1911, the *Pan American Bulletin* noted that "sponges are known to the general public almost solely for their use in the toilet," but that this was "one of their minor applications."⁶³ By the 1930s, the automobile and paint

industries were the largest U.S. consumers of sponges.⁶⁴ Throughout this period of growth, New York dealers expressed concerns about overfishing, as well as a related desire for a system of marine monoculture cultivation that would detach sponge production from naturally-limited sponge beds.⁶⁵ But no commercially-viable method emerged, so sponge consumption remained dependent on the ecology of Tarpon Springs and Batabanó.

While the United States' primary pressure on the Gulf of Batabanó was material, an imaginative, cultural consumption of the Batabanó sponge fishery also occurred via newspapers and travel writing. As the 20th century progressed, the town of Batabanó increasingly appeared in American tourist guides as a must-see site.⁶⁶ Tourist articles and advertisements flaunted the impressive size of the industry, with headlines like "Cuban Sponges Scrub World" leading into grandiose descriptions of "the largest sponge depot" and "the greatest sponge market" in the world.⁶⁷ Photographs of piles of sponges onshore and particularly massive specimens further confirmed this abundance to U.S. readers. At the same time, travelers' accounts emphasized the town and the fishery's quaintness. One tourist party told of a little girl dancing for spare coins amongst the drying sponges, while many other writers emphasized the quiet, rustic and "picturesque" nature of Batabanó, an epitome of "untouched rural Cuba."⁶⁸ Authors took care to differentiate between Tarpon Springs' "scientific" sponging and Batabanó's, which was "pursued with all the primitiveness and leisure associated with sponge fishing since classic times."⁶⁹ Travel writers' simultaneous

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emphases on Batabanó's ecological abundance and its rural primitiveness crafted a image of natural, undeveloped Caribbean fecundity, rather than of a complex industry whose products were central to U.S. industrialization and modernization.

THE LEGACY OF BATABANÓ SPONGE FISHING: 1930 AND BEYOND

The American construction of Batabanó—and Cuba more broadly—as a quaint, abundant space of tropical production continued through the eve of the Cuban Revolution, as a 1959 advert asked U.S. readers, “Do you know the real Cuba? [...] Have you watched them bring in the sponges at Batabanó?”⁷⁰ Between the early years of Batabanó's sponge fishery and the late 1950s, enormous changes occurred in the industry. The 1926 Havana-Bermuda hurricane destroyed much of Batabanó's sponging infrastructure, but the industry rebounded quickly and continued strong production until the late 1930s. Between 1937 and 1939, a blight of unknown origin decimated sponge beds throughout the Caribbean, but the Cuban and Floridian industries recovered, and Cuban imports supplied almost all U.S. consumption when World War II disrupted supplies in Europe. Production dropped as the artificial sponge began to dominate the market, but natural sponges continued to be a key export until the U.S. embargo in May 1962.⁷¹ Throughout the 70 years of the Batabanó sponge fishery, fishermen worked the sponge beds precariously close to the Gulf of Batabanó's ecological

limits in order to meet U.S. and European demand, thus establishing and maintaining one of the many supply chains that enabled Western industrialization.

Yet since 1962, scholarly and popular attention to Batabanó's sponge fishery and Caribbean sponging has waned. As the artificial sponge pushed the natural sponge from its place as a competing product to an artisanal, specialty item, the memory of the massive, complex Caribbean sponging industries faded. In Tarpon Springs, the continued existence of a niche sponge fishery and recent scholarly recovery projects have kept the link between sponging and Tarpon Springs alive. Not so with Batabanó—the once-enormous industry now appears a historical oddity, when remembered at all. But the story of the Batabanó sponge fishery is not—nor ever was—one of just a quaint Cuban curiosity. The industry tied together the ecology of the Gulf of Batabanó, the lives of Cuban fishers and merchants, and the fluctuations of a rapacious American industrial market. The history of this ecologically-precarious marine resource showcases the diversity of relationships between the U.S. and Cuba in the 20th century and centers the ocean as a historicized site of extraction and exploitation. Studying this locally-situated industry with a eye towards larger patterns of trade and consumption enables a richer understanding of what Batabanó's sponges meant to the men who harvested them, to the Cuban officials who regulated and promoted their harvest, and to the U.S. dealers, artisans, and manufacturers who eventually consumed them. ■■■

Endnotes

[1] Mimi Sheller, *Consuming the Caribbean: From Arawaks to Zombies*, (London: Routledge, 2003): 22.

[2] Sheller, *Consuming the Caribbean*, 61.

[3] F. A. Pierce, “Sponge Industry in the Americas” *Bulletin of the Pan American Union*: April 1911, (Washington, DC: The Pan American Union, 1911): 666.; Richard A. Kahn and Lois B. Sandven, “Sponge Production and International Sponge Trade of the United States,” *Fishery Leaflet 170*, U.S. Department of the Interior Fish and Wildlife Service, Jan. 1946.

[4] For a critique of these dominant themes in Latin American history, see Mark Carey, “Latin American Environmental History: Current Trends, Interdisciplinary Insights, and Future Directions.” *Environmental History* 14, no. 2 (April 2009): 221-252. For examples of these histories of monoculture, see: Richard Tucker, *Insatiable Appetite: The United States and the Ecological Degradation of the Tropical World* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2007).; Sidney Mintz, *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History*, (New York, NY: Viking, 1985).; Laird Bergad, *Cuban Rural Society in the Nineteenth Century. The Social and Economic History of Monoculture in Matanzas*. (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1990); Warren Dean, *With Broadax and Firebrand: The Destruction of the Brazilian Atlantic Forest*, (Berkeley: UC Press, 1995).

[5] Robb Robinson “Hook, Line and Sinker: Fishing history—where we have been, where we are now and where are we going?” *The Mariner's Mirror* 97, no. 1 (2011): 167-179. See 169-171 for a discussion of early works of marine environmental history.

[6] At the time, McEvoy described his work as “environmental-economic history,” for the conceptualization of marine environmental history as a robust, independent subfield was still years away. Arthur McEvoy, *The Fisherman's Problem: Ecology and Law in the California Fisheries, 1850-1980*. (Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 1986). For 1990s histories, see J. K. Walton's social history, *Fish and Chips and the British Working Class, 1870–1914* (1992), the essay collection *How Deep is the Ocean* (1997), and Joseph Taylor's *Making Salmon: An Environmental History of the Northwest Fisheries Crisis* (1999).

[7] W. Jeffrey Bolster, “Opportunities in Marine Environmental History.” *Environmental History* 11, no. 3 (Jul 2006): 580. Though some historians have critiqued the project's narrow focus on population reconstruction estimates, scholars affiliated with HMAP have produced a wealth of innovative, generative scholarship. For examples of HMAP's work, see: *Oceans Past: Management Insights From the History of Marine Animal Populations*, Edited by David J. Starkey, Poul Holm and Michaela Barnard, (London: Earthscan, 2008).

- [8] See the HMAP collection: *The Exploited Seas: New Directions for Marine Environmental History*, edited by Poul Holm, Tim D. Smith and David J. Starkey, St. John's: International Maritime Economic History Association, 2001. For a historical-ecological work on the Caribbean written in the same moment as HMAP, see Romero Aldemaro et. al., "Environmental History of Marine Mammal Exploitation in Trinidad and Tobago, W.I., and its Ecological Impact," *Environment and History* 8, no. 3 (2002): 255-274.
- [9] Michael Suver, "Environmental Change and Place-Based Identities: Sponge Fishing in Tarpon Springs, Florida," Order No. 1530839, U. of South Florida, 2012.; Dolores Ann Kilgo, *Tarpon Springs (Images of America Series)*, (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Pub, 2002).; Loren McClenachan, "Social Conflict, Over-Fishing and Disease in the Florida Sponge Fishery, 1849-1939" in *Oceans Past*.
- [10] Michael Kalafatas, *The Bellstone: the Greek Sponge Divers of the Aegean: One American's Journey Home*, (Hanover, NH: U. of NE Press, 2003).; Faith Warn, *Bitter Sea: The Real Story of Greek Sponge Diving*, (Guardian Angel, 2000).
- [11] McClenachan, "Social Conflict," 28.
- [12] Florida Writers' Program, "Stories of Florida: Prepared for use in Public Schools: Spinging at Key West," Work Projects Administration, 1940. There was also a much smaller spinging industry developing on the northern Gulf coast of Florida near Apalachicola at this time.
- [13] McClenachan, "Social Conflict," 29.
- [14] Richard Rathbun, "The Sponge Fishery and Trade," in *The fisheries and fishery industries of the United States*, 1887, accessed via nmfs.noaa.gov: 821, 830.
- [15] *Ibid*, 821.
- [16] *Ibid*, 820.
- [17] *Ibid*, 831.
- [18] McClenachan, "Social Conflict," 30. See also Albert Hart, "A Treatise on Sponges and Commercial Notes, Read at the NY College of Pharmacy, Columbia University," May 1913.
- [19] F. A. Pierce, "Sponge Industry in the Americas," 667.
- [20] Rathbun, "The Sponge Fishery and Trade," 822.
- [21] H.F. Moore, "Commercial Sponges and the Sponge Fisheries," *Bulletin of the Bureau of Fisheries*. Vol. XXVIII, 1908. In two parts. Part 1. (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1908): 442; Myrtle Ferry, "The Sponge Industry of Tarpon Springs," *Marine Fisheries Review* 29, no. 10 (1967): 82-86.
- [22] Rathbun, "The Sponge Fishery and Trade," 825.
- [23] Ferry, "The Sponge Industry of Tarpon Springs," 82-83.
- [24] "Sparkman, Stephen Milanchon," *Biographical Directory of the United States Congress*, bioguide.congress.gov, Accessed April 3, 2018.
- [25] United States Congress, House Committee on Merchant Marine and Fisheries. *Protection of the Sponge Industry*, (Washington, DC: GPO, 1906).
- [26] Sparkman in US Congress, *Protection of the Sponge Industry*, 6-7.
- [27] Sparkman remarked that, although sponges were found "in the waters of the Mediterranean, off the coast of Africa, and possibly in the Bahamas," they were "found now only in limited quantities in those waters." U.S. Congress, *Protection of the Sponge Industry*, 4.
- [28] Moore, "The Commercial Sponges," 472-474.
- [29] *Ibid*, 462.
- [30] For example, for a social history of the industrialization of sugar in the region see: Laird Bergad, *Cuban Rural Society in the Nineteenth Century. The Social and Economic History of Monoculture in Matanzas*. (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1990).
- [31] Roig, Mario Sánchez, "La Riqueza Espongicola Cubana," *Rev. Agric.* 28, no. 1 (1945): 26.; Moore, "The Commercial Sponges," 472.; Rathbun, "The Sponge Fishery," 837.; "Sponge Fishers, Coast of Cuba," *Harper's Weekly*, May 28, 1870: 349.; "Buques del Cabotaje," *Noticioso Mercantil* (Havana, Cuba), February 15, 1832.; Willis Fletcher Johnson, "Chapter XXVII: Poultry: Bees: Sponges" in *The History of Cuba*, Vol. 5, (New York: B.F. Buck & Company, 1920).
- [32] Pierce, "The Sponge Industry in the Americas," 679.
- [33] Moore, "The Commercial Sponges," 473.
- [34] Roig, "La Riqueza Espongicola Cubana," 26.
- [35] "Cuba" *Times-Picayune*, published as *The Daily Picayune* (New Orleans, LA), Dec 24, 1884.
- [36] Moore writes that over 180 sponge fishers were employed in Batabanó in 1891. Moore, "The Commercial Sponges," 473.
- [37] Juan Vilaro y Diaz, *Esponjicultura Cubana*, (Havana: La Propaganda Literaria, 1890).
- [38] For examples of trade notices, see "Reappraisal of Imports," *The New York Times* (New York, NY), Apr 12, 1898; Apr 23, 1898. For an example of U.S. pre-war interest in Cuba and "yellow journalism" related to spinging, see "Cuban Filibusters Suspected.; A Spinging Vessel Stolen from Its Moorings at Key West," *The New York Times* (New York, NY), June 1, 1895.
- [39] "Plenty to Eat in Havana," *The New York Tribune* (New York, NY), June 21, 1898.; "Dons Routed By Marines," *San Francisco Chronicle* (San Francisco, CA), Aug 12, 1898.; "Key West Feels Safe," June 21, 1898.
- [40] Gobierno Militar de la Isla de Cuba, *Cuba En La Exposición Pan Americana de Buffalo*, (Havana: Vicente Lopez Veiga, 1901).
- [41] *Monthly Summary of Commerce from the Island of Cuba*, Division of Insular Affairs: War Department, (Washington: GPO, 1899-1902).
- [42] "In Terror: Are the Sugar Planters of Santa Clara," *Courier-Journal* (Louisville, KY), January 4, 1904.
- [43] "Isle of Pines Notes," *The Cuba Review* 9, no. 1 (Dec 1910): 28.; See also image: "Casas River with Sponge Fishing Boats, Isle of Pines, From todocoleccion.net, n.d.
- [44] In his history of Isle of Pines, "America's Forgotten Colony," historian Michael Neagle traces the ambitions, antagonisms, and collaborations between the Americans and Cubans living on the Isle and around the Gulf. Michael Neagle, *America's Forgotten Colony: Cuba's Isle of Pines*, (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2016).
- [45] Pierce, "The Sponge Industry in the Americas," 679.; "Rootless Sponges From Cuba," *Christian Science Monitor* (Boston, MA), Sept. 19, 1911.
- [46] "Los Pescadores de Batabano Se Defienden," *El Mundo* (Havana, Cuba), Aug 13, 1915.
- [47] On systematic auction, see Moore "The Commercial Sponges," 474. On pay structure and Greek participation, see "The Sponge Fisheries of Cuba," *Journal of the Society of Arts* 49 (Aug

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- 2, 1901): 686.; "The Sponge Fishery in Cuba," *The Cuba Review* 9, no. 6 (May 1911): 22-24.
- [48] Quadreny would even become an influential figure in Havana politics and serve on the board of a major coal company. See: "La Compañía Carbonera de Cuba," *El Mundo* (Havana, Cuba), Dec. 30, 1911. "De Batabano: Una Dualista," *La Lucha* (Havana, Cuba), Dec. 14, 1908.
- [49] A Cuban consular official mentioned sponges as one of Cuba's key unique and internationally-competitive assets in his argument for a commercial-diplomatic bulletin. "Una Memoria Interesante," *La Lucha* (Havana, Cuba), 1904.
- [50] "Casa Presidencial: Da Pesca de Esponjas," *La Lucha*, (Havana, Cuba), Dec 29, 1910.; "Veda para la pesca de esponjas," *El Mundo* (Havana, Cuba), Mar 5, 1912.
- [51] "La Industria Esponjera de Cuba," *La Lucha* (Havana, Cuba), Aug, 6, 1912.; "Junta Nacional de Pesca," *El Mundo* (Havana, Cuba), Sep 6, 1912.
- [52] "Los Pescadores de Batabano Se Defienden," *El Mundo* (Havana, Cuba), Aug 13, 1915.
- [53] "El Reglamiento de la Pesca," *El Mundo* (Havana, Cuba), Aug 8, 1915
- [54] "Los Pescadores de Batabano Se Defienden," *El Mundo* (Havana, Cuba), Aug. 13, 1915.
- [55] Gobierno Militar, "Division VII: Peces y Pesqueria," *Cuba En La Exposición Pan Americana*.
- [56] "Cuba," *History of the Louisiana Purchase Exposition* (St Louis: Universal Exposition Publishing Company, 1905): 223-224.; *Official Catalogue of Exhibitors: Universal Exposition, St. Louis, U.S.A.,* (St. Louis: The Official Catalogue Company, 1904): 1349.; *Official Catalogue of Exhibitors: Panama-Pacific International Exposition,* (San Francisco, The Wahlgreen Company, 1915): 92.
- [57] For more on the role of World's Fairs and Congresses in modern internationalism, see: John Culbert Faires, "The Rise of Internationalism," (dissertation, Columbia University, 1915).
- [58] "Memoria Anual del Consul Honorario de Cuba en Vigo: Pesca," *Boletín Oficial del Departamento del Estado*, (Havana: La Moderna Poesía, 1907): 244
- [59] "La Industria Esponjera de Cuba," *La Lucha* (Havana, Cuba), Aug, 6, 1912.
- [60] Rathbun, "The Sponge Fishery and Trade," 820.
- [61] On agents: Rhodes' *Common Sense Method of Selling Sponges*, New York: James H. Rhodes & Company, 1917 lists an auxiliary address in Batabano. Cuban agents are also mentioned in the *Guía Comercial*, (New York: The National City Bank of New York, 1920): 234, 237, 324.; On Juan Esfakis' influence on the sponge industry, see Jacob Bernstein, "Wiping out the Spongers," *Miami New Times* (Miami, FL), Apr 20, 2000.
- [62] On druggists: Hart, "A Treatise on Sponges," 34. On railroads: Frederick Hurd Thompson, "Selling to the Railroads: A \$1,250,000,000 Customer," *System: The Magazine of Business* (Feb 1915): 185-192.
- [63] Pierce, "Sponge Industry in the Americas," 666.
- [64] George S. Corfield, "Sponge Industry of the Caribbean Area," *Economic Geography* 14, no. 2 (Apr 1938): 201-206.
- [65] Hart, "A Treatise on Sponges," 13-18.
- [66] On increasing tourism: "Cuban Port Wins Riches in Sponges," *Christian Science Monitor* (Boston, MA), Apr 1 1930.; "Offers an Unrivaled Program of Winter Amusements," *Washington Post* (Washington, D.C.), Dec 28, 1924.
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- [67] Grant, George. "Cuban Farmers," *Daily Boston Globe* (Boston, MA), Jan 20, 1930.; "Cuban Sponges Scrub World," *Los Angeles Times* (Los Angeles, CA), July 16, 1928.
- [68] Thedia Cox Kenyon, "Sponge Port," *Christian Science Monitor* (Boston, MA), Sep 23, 1941.; "Random Notes for Travelers," *New York Times* (New York, NY), Oct 15, 1939. "Rustic Towns Dot Cuba Near Havana," *Philadelphia Inquirer* (Philadelphia, PA), Dec 2, 1951. Some newspaper articles expressed surprise at the quality of infrastructure and sanitation in Batabanó, such as: "Visitors Find Gay Capital Beautiful," *Washington Post* (Washington, D.C.), Feb 13, 1938.
- [69] "Sharks Are Menace of Sponge Hunters." *Boston Journal* (Boston, MA), Apr 8, 1909.
- [70] "Do You Know the Real Cuba?" *New York Herald Tribune* (New York, NY), Dec 6, 1959.
- [71] Josh Vasil Petrof, "A Study of the Florida Natural Sponge Industry with Special Emphasis on its Marketing Problems," (dissertation, University of Florida at Gainesville, 1967), 158.