

The Cuban sponge economy, 1850s-1980s

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ABSTRACT: Cuba became a major producer of sponges in modern times, and yet there exists no general history of the commodity's role in the country's history. Information is scattered here and there in published texts, while original documents gather dust in the archives. A boom period stretched, with ups and downs, from the 1850s to the late 1930s. Sponges of medium quality, often more suited to industrial than personal uses, formed the mainstay of Cuban output. Prices were thus generally lower than for Mediterranean sponges, and tariff protection on the American market became a mainstay for Cuban producers, from the end of Spanish rule in 1898 to the revolution of 1959. From 1938, however, disease nearly destroyed the industry. Recovery was slow and partial, albeit stimulated by a brief period of very high prices during the Second World War. Moreover, the emergence of effective synthetic sponges after the Second World War, mainly substituting for natural sponges of lower quality, hit Cuba harder than its Mediterranean rivals. A second opportunity resulted from a blight in Mediterranean waters, in the late 1980s.

The origins of the sponge economy, 1850s to 1898

Cuba was part of a wider sponge production zone in the Americas, which first saw the light of day in the Bahamas in 1841.¹ The rise of new producers in the Western Hemisphere was a response to increasing prices in the West, as the traditional producers of the Mediterranean could no longer meet rising demand.² Cuba's commercial sponges, nearly all common to American waters, were generally inferior to those of the Mediterranean, albeit with considerable variations. The most valued kinds were sheepswool, followed by velvet and yellow. Grass, glove, reef, hardhead, and wire sponges were less desired.³

Bahamian sponge gatherers quite soon moved south into the necklace of 'keys', small islands and reefs, which dot the northern coast of Cuba. This zone was centred on Caibarién (in Vila Clara), and stretched roughly from Cárdenas (in Matanzas) in the west, to Nuevitas (in Camaguey) in the east. Production was 'unofficial' at first, and no dues were paid.⁴ However, at a later stage, many Bahamians obtained Spanish licences to gather sponges.⁵ Settlers from the Balearic Islands also took to this form of production, as well as Greeks and local Cubans.⁶

A richer source of sponges was tapped from 1883, in the Gulf of Batabanó. In that year, the first shipment to the protected market of Spain occurred.⁷ The centre of this production zone was in the port of Surgidero (or Playa) de Batabanó, to the south of Havana. A shallow body of water stretched from here to the Isla de Pinos (today Isla de la Juventud), which proved to be ideal for sponges.⁸ Surgidero de Batabanó was even called, with considerable hyperbole, 'the sponge capital of the whole world'.⁹

Attempts to monopolise sponge production in the late Spanish period were frustrated.¹⁰ This probably refers to the 'Cuban Sponge Fishing Co.', which allegedly held 'special concessions from the Cuban government'. By 1886, this company had granted the Cresswell family firm in London the exclusive right to sell Cuban sponges in Britain.¹¹

Greeks were present in Cuba at least from the early 1880s, initially experimenting with diving suits, but quickly turning to marketing sponges rather than producing them.¹² Greeks played a crucial role in developing exports markets abroad, especially in France and the USA, with Giannis Esfakis Yanakakis remembered as a memorable pioneer.¹³

On the Batabanó banks in 1898, small sailing boats, of 5 to 20 tons burden, carried a crew of four to eight men, with rowing boats deployed to collect sponges. Surgidero de Batabanó was a rather unattractive boom town, with its cheaply and hurriedly built houses surrounded by dismal swamps. About 800 people were employed in the sector, with output valued at some \$600,000. This compared to \$300,000 to \$400,000 for the Caibarién zone, where rowing boats were in use.¹⁴

The growth of an American-oriented sponge economy, 1898 to 1938

The ending of Spanish rule in 1898 resulted in nominal Cuban independence, albeit under forceful American ‘protection’. In return for American privileges, Cuba received special treatment for its products, including sponges, on an American market that was incomparably larger and more dynamic than that of Spain. Cuba was thus drawn increasingly into selling sponges to its powerful northern neighbour, notably through the port of New York. Cuban sheepswool, yellow, and grass varieties competed with those of Florida and the Bahamas, the latter of which also received tariff advantages after negotiations with Britain. In contrast, the American tariff wall hindered Mediterranean competition.¹⁵

Exports of Cuban sponges fluctuated, but the USA consistently figured as the most significant market in these decades. In 1905, the value of exports stood at \$341,387, about two-thirds to the USA, and one-third to France. This represented around 10% of the world trade in sponges, although both Florida and the Bahamas traded at a slightly higher level than Cuba.¹⁶ In terms of export volume, a first peak was reached in 1907, with 310,000 dozen sponges, followed by a decline to the early 1920s.¹⁷ This reflected the negative evolution of world prices for sponges from the mid-1900s, albeit with a brief reprieve during the First World War. After a brief boom in the late 1920s, exports suffered again during the Great Depression, as prices fell around the world.¹⁸ From a peak of 1,257,000 dozen sponges exported in 1930, nearly half of which were destined to the USA, Cuba’s total fell to around 725,000 in 1937.¹⁹

Cuba was one of the largest producers of sponges in the Americas in 1935, employing some 1,700 people in direct production, with about 5,000 in all dependent on the industry. A cooperative had recently been formed. Exports stood at some \$455,000 a year, about three-quarters of which went to the USA, with most of the rest destined for Germany and France. Moreover, the USA took another \$150,000 a year of ‘sponge waste’, largely for the production of insulation materials.²⁰ Cuba represented some 25% of the Americas’ output by weight in 1938.²¹ In 1935-1939, sponges accounted for 87% of all Cuban ‘fishery’ products by value.²² Nearly all the output was exported, as local consumption, chiefly for garages and hospitals, accounted for under 2% of output.²³

Sponge gatherers experimented with various methods, but hooking from rowing boats became the established method, mirroring the situation in the Bahamas and Key West in Florida. There was some wading in very shallow waters. However, producers abandoned early experiments with naked diving, diving suits, and dragging a grapnel over the seabed.²⁴ In the Caibarién zone in the north, Bahamians continued to gather sponges, often evading payments to the Cuban revenue service.²⁵

Over time, sailing boats became larger, carrying crews of 14 to 16 men. On the grounds, men paired off in flat-bottomed boats, one oarsman and one hooker. The latter used a water-glass and a three-pronged hook. Owners of boats advanced food and supplies on credit to the crew, and received 20 to 25% of the catch. The remaining sponges were divided equally among the crew, and were sold by individuals.²⁶

Surgidero de Batabanó was the main centre for primary processing and local marketing. Initial sales of sponges might remain quite informal, with ‘convenient coffee-houses’

servicing for transactions. Some merchants from Surgidero de Batabanó ventured to the north coast to increase their purchases.²⁷ Increasingly, however, sponges were sold at auction by sealed bids, with payment in cash under official supervision. Sponges were then trimmed, sorted, graded, weighed, pressed and baled. Bales of 50 to 55 pounds, or more for trimmings, were sent north to Havana by road or rail for export.²⁸

Greeks continued to figure prominently in marketing sponges. Nikolaos Vouvalis (1859-1918), a merchant from Kalymnos, had emigrated to London and developed large-scale commercial operations in sponges there from 1882. By the early 1900s, the firm of N. Vouvalis & Co. had established either branches or agencies in both Batabanó and Caibarién.²⁹

Volatility after 1938

In late 1938, a natural disaster struck the sector. A deadly fungus first appeared in the Bahamas in the autumn of 1937, and it spread with currents around the western Atlantic. Recovery was slow. Output in the Americas had been about 1,750,000 pounds in 1938, but was only 300,000 pounds in 1947. The Bahamas suffered the worst, with production falling from 670,000 pounds to a mere 40,000 pounds. Cuba was hit in 1939, and was over the worst of the disease by 1943, but output still went down from 440,000 pounds to 100,000 pounds over this period.³⁰ Moreover, a particularly violent hurricane, in October 1944, worsened the situation on Cuba's north coast.³¹

At the same time, the blight caused the price of Cuban sponges to rise, and the world war pushed them up to even dizzy heights. Mediterranean production became unexportable in 1940, and America's entry into the conflict, at the end of 1941, drove up industrial consumption in the USA.³² The average value of a dozen sponges had been only US\$ 0.58 in 1935-1939, whereas this stood at US\$ 10.04 in 1946. In nominal terms, this was a seventeen-fold rise.³³ Sponge cuttings and trimmings sold at 3 cents per pound in 1935-1939, if they could find a buyer at all, but reached a peak of 73 cents per pound in 1944.³⁴ One would need to factor in war-time inflation to get at the more modest increase in real terms.

Paradoxically, therefore, Cuba had become one of the largest exporters of sponges in the world by the end of the global conflict, in spite of plummeting production.³⁵ This 'dance of the millions', in the usually sedate world of sponges, was driven by the American war effort. The US supply crisis came to a head in 1944, when America's local output and imports of natural sponges fell to only 24% of the corresponding figure for 1935.³⁶ Nearly all sponges were reserved for the American army, or for companies engaged in production for war. Ham-fisted attempts to cap prices internally had little impact.³⁷

In 1944, the American government therefore cited the necessities of war to impose a price cut of 20 to 50% on imported Cuban sponges. This resulted in bitter protests by the workers of Batabanó, whose syndicate acquired a glowing reputation in the revolutionary history of the Cuban working class.³⁸ Over 1,300 people were still working directly in the sector in 1945.³⁹ About 1,000 men crewed sponge boats in the Batabanó region in 1948.⁴⁰

Crisis came as world trade returned to its normal state after the war, and Mediterranean producers, unaffected by the blight of the late 1930s, flooded the market with stored sponges.⁴¹ Moreover, under the stimulus of the war-time crisis, synthetic production had risen rapidly, and was especially effective in replacing the relatively inexpensive sponges for industrial purposes, in which Cuba tended to specialise.⁴² There was a certain revival from the mid-1950s, even though Cuba's output remained far behind that of the Mediterranean.⁴³

Following the triumph of the Cuban Revolution in 1959, the new government reorganised production, and attempted to develop exports to Western Europe to earn foreign exchange, as the American market was now closed. A Flota Estatal Esponjera (State Sponging Fleet) was headquartered in Surgidero de Batabanó, with 24 recently built ships, accounting for one eighth of the vessels operating out of the port by the late 1960s. Moreover, an experimental programme of sponge aquaculture was launched in 1965. That said, initial results were somewhat disappointing.⁴⁴ Indeed, Cuba was no longer even listed among the major global producers in the late 1960s.⁴⁵

The vagaries of disease played in Cuba's favour once more in the late 1980s. Output hovering around 50 metric tons represented between 10 and 20% of the world total at the beginning of the decade, but this shot up to 45% in 1988. This was the result of another malady, which devastated the Mediterranean beds this time, and which turned Cuba into a major supplier of the European continent. There were complaints as to the quality of Cuban sponges, especially in Italy, but alternative sources had collapsed.⁴⁶

Conclusion

Much further research is needed to recover the full story of sponges in Cuba, though it is clear that they played a significant role in the global sponge economy from the middle of the nineteenth century. Local opportunities and constraints need to be weighed against the international commercial context, which alternately favoured and penalised Cuban sponges.

NOTES

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