

A change in the course of the migration of the cariboo or the periodical failure of the rabbits has always been attended by starvation and hardship among the natives, and has, in the past, been the cause of occasional lapses towards cannibalism. If it were not for the food supply of fish, it would be exceedingly difficult for the natives to live at all, and it is safe to say that no country in the world has such a large quantity or excellent quality of food fishes as the lakes and streams of the Mackenzie basin.

INHABITANTS.

The population of the Mackenzie basin, at the present time, numbers only a few thousands, the larger proportion of which are Indians and half-breeds. Most of the white population is segregated on the southern fringe of the region. The widely separated posts in the central and northern parts of the basin average perhaps a dozen white people each, and these posts are usually about 150 miles apart. As far northward, however, as the Liard river and Great Slave lake, which might be considered the northern limit to which any considerable settlement of an agricultural population will take place, there is within the basin of the Mackenzie an area of about 200,000 square miles, which should be able to support a population of at least 2,000,000 people, or about ten persons to the square mile, and that mainly from agriculture.

WATERWAYS.

One of the most important features of the Mackenzie basin, and one on which to a very large extent the development of the region depends, is its system of waterways. These waterways are the main highways of the region, and except for the very southern fringe of the region, where railways and wagon roads are now being built, constitute the only routes of travel in winter as well as in summer. Until 25 or 30 years ago, the only craft plying on them were the York boats of the traders and the canoes of the natives. Since that time river steamers have been built and now run on all sections of the main waterway. At the present time steamers are running on the Athabasca, Peace, Slave and Mackenzie rivers.

The Mackenzie system of waterways, on which steamers can and do run, has a known length of river and lake shore line of 6,900 miles. This system is divided naturally into four sections, each section being separated from the adjoining one by natural obstructions of falls or heavy rapids which the steamers cannot surmount. These sections I have named for convenience:—(1) The Athabasca river section; (2) the Peace