

CITATION
Award of the National Medal for Science and Technology

MR. AUSTIN JAMES THOMAS
1909 – 1988

Jamaicans have for many years been accustomed to having fish in their diet. From early on, this was usually some imported fish such as salted cod, pickled herring and some form of canned fish. The prospect of a locally based fishing industry owes much of its existence to Mr. A. J. (Jimmy) Thomas. He was able to provide the leadership in developing a land-based fishing industry, as well as in significantly enhancing the effectiveness of marine fishing

If the African Perch is today one of the most widely bred fish in the world, it is due in no small measure to the foresight and the expertise of Austin James Thomas, born in Westmoreland in 1909. The African perch is now the breed of choice in fish farms all over the world and the development of a billion dollar worldwide industry.

A self-taught scientist, he mechanised the Jamaican fishing operations and became an international authority and consultant on the African Perch.

Mr. Thomas was the Government Fisheries Officer in 1949, when samples of the African Perch were brought to Jamaica from St. Lucia by the colonial authorities. They did not thrive and he was subsequently sent to Africa to look for suitable varieties. He noted that they thrived well under the local conditions. He returned from Africa determined to experiment with the fish, with a view to adapting them

to local conditions. His experiments started with the *Tilapia mossambica*.

He built ponds and began to measure the growth of the African Perch over time. He found that the fish in the ponds in a mixed-sex environment did not develop in any significant way. The critical observation that was made by Mr. Thomas and his co-workers was that when the fish were separated by sex, male fish reared by themselves grew the fastest. Thus conceived the brilliant concept of 'monosex culture', a monumental achievement, which was to revolutionize the fishing industry globally and see it balloon into billion dollar industries in countries as far apart as Israel, the United States of America and Jamaica.

Later, another species *Tilapia nilotica* – the silver perch – was introduced from America and proved more popular in terms of local market acceptance. On the basis of this success, the Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO) hired him as a consultant and he was posted to several countries in Africa, including The Gambia where he was instrumental in improving the diet for the people.

Mr. Thomas also turned his attention to the technology of sea fishing. Initially, the canoes that went to sea were powered by sails and oars. He introduced the outboard motor for the ocean-going canoes and also standardized the design of the fish pots. These innovations enabled the ocean-going industry to be more efficient and greatly improved the quality of the product.

His wide interest in fish extended to mapping the location of the mountain mullet, alleged to be the tastiest fish in the world. Unfortunately, his warnings about the threat to their existence were not heeded, nor was his lonely campaign to preserve the lower morass eco-system of St. Elizabeth.

The Government of Jamaica is pleased to honour the late Mr. Austin James Thomas, for his ground breaking and internationally recognised work on fish and to award him posthumously **THE NATIONAL MEDAL FOR SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY.**

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