

The Lobster Conservancy

Sustaining a thriving lobster fishery through science and community

Summer 2012

Dear Volunteers and Friends of The Lobster Conservancy,

The Lobster Conservancy's mission is to strive to sustain a thriving lobster fishery through science and community. Our periodic (we try for quarterly) newsletter keeps members and volunteers informed of recent research, education and outreach activities.

A New Lobster Book

The Maine Lobster Book written by Virginia M. Wright and published by Down East Books is now available. An informative, fun, fact and photo-filled book in three parts: Learn, Live and Eat, will appeal especially to curious readers and cooks. The Lobster Conservancy is featured prominently in the learning section where I found cause to laugh out loud. My favorite quote from Ginny's book is "Female lobsters have crushes on males with big crushers." – referring to the female lobster's preference for choosing a big-clawed male as her mate.

Reprint from Portland Press Herald

Portland Press Herald, 1:00 AM, June 25, 2012

Maine Voices: Lobster stocks will plummet if safeguards aren't put in place soon

We must raise legal size limits so smaller lobsters can reproduce and grow and the fishery can survive.

By DIANE COWAN

FRIENDSHIP - My phone rang at 6:30 a.m. The lobsterman calling was anything but cheery.

PPH Opinion

He asked if I thought he should get a federal permit and move his traps far enough offshore to make a living. It was either that, he said, or leave the business altogether.

What could I say? The Maine lobster fishery is in that kind of trouble.

Increasing numbers of the crustaceans landed locally come from 30 miles offshore. An expansion in the area fished and the ability to fish in all seasons offer the best explanation for soaring catches that culminated in a record harvest of more than 100 million pounds in 2011.

Lobsters are not what they used to be. I live and work in Friendship, where lobsters are the way of life. Lobstermen here are on edge because they know their hauls are different -- smaller and softer lobsters are bringing in less revenue. They know their futures are at stake. Every day, people ask me what's wrong with the lobsters and whether things will turn around.

The Lobster Conservancy

Today I bought lobsters for dinner. The co-op manager knows I like pound-and-a-half males with big claws and a firm shell. There weren't any. The lobsters were too small and soft. Shedders, in June, six weeks early!

I bought the best I could find, and they were tasty, but I saw it as yet another warning. The lobsters are in trouble.

The problem is twofold.

- First, recent winters haven't been cold enough to slow lobster growth. In winter, lobsters take time off from growing to put energy into reproduction. But their metabolism slows down sufficiently to prepare for reproduction only if water temperatures fall below 40 degrees.

Last winter, it didn't. The water was warm enough so that lobsters -- instead of taking time off to rest -- continued to grow. That's why so many outgrew their shells early. The May/June shedders are telling us that lobsters may not have put reserves into egg and sperm production because they were too busy growing.

It's a scary message. If lobsters don't reproduce, the species is doomed.

- So what about those 100 million pounds? We must be managing the situation fine, right? Well, that's the second part of the problem.

I've long avoided a gloom-and-doom attitude about the lobster fishery. I believed that the trap system gave lobsters a choice about being caught; I thought the size limits helped protect them; and I think the family lobstering tradition fosters a conservation ethic.

I knew that juvenile lobsters were abundant and many year classes contribute to a year's harvest, such that it might take five or six "off" years before we'd see harvests plummet. Besides, lobsters are successful creatures that have been around for millennia. They've lived through tough times, shifts in climate and habitat.

Now, however, I'm down to thinking that although lobsters will survive, they may not remain sufficiently abundant to support a fishery, and they may not remain in the near-shore waters where we've traditionally harvested them. Look at the population crashes to our south: Long Island Sound, then southern New England. Can the Gulf of Maine escape that fate?

We can't do much about the water temperature beyond hoping it turns colder again. But we can change the way we manage the lobsters that remain to us.

The obvious solution is to raise the legal size limits. We've managed to destroy the natural lobster population size and age structure by catching millions of lobsters as soon as they hit legal size, before most have reproduced even once. We're going farther and farther offshore to catch them.

How many bigger ones are left out there? Our research suggests that larger lobsters find ways to cope with the warm winters because bigger, older lobsters move around more than smaller ones. Somehow, we have to give the little ones time to grow, reproduce and become big lobsters if we want the fishery to survive.

The Lobster Conservancy

I didn't know what to tell my lobsterman friend that morning, but I know that safe management measures can protect him and the rest of the fishery against the worst-case scenario.

Long Island Sound and all of southern New England have started on this road, but it's probably too little, too late for them. It's not too late for the Gulf of Maine, but we have to act now. The time to protect our lobster stocks is before the fishery crashes.

Diane Cowan is executive director of The Lobster Conservancy.

Other News

Lobster House



We've put the Lobster House (The Lobster Conservancy's office in town) on the market. Here's the listing: http://www.realtor.com/realestateandhomes-detail/6-Waldoboro-Rd-Friendship_ME_04547_M41737-70837?source=web. We look forward to moving back to the first office former executive director, Sara Ellis worked out of on Friendship Harbor - with fond memories of the good old days and new good days to come.

The Lobster Conservancy needs a boat

The Lobster Conservancy is looking for a "new" skiff. Let us know if you know of anything. The boat needs to have a good sturdy hull and be big enough to carry science gear but small enough to land on shore (i.e., between 18 & 21 feet long). Dream boat for our purposes is Seaway, Eastern or West Pointer with 40 horse power outboard. Thank you in advance for any leads or dare I dream of a donation?

Friendship Day

Don't forget to visit The Lobster Conservancy touch tank on Friendship Day! July 28. 9-11 am. Friendship Day Touch Tank. The Lobster Conservancy at 6 Waldoboro Rd, Friendship, Maine.

Happy Summer!

Yours in TLC,

Diane F. Cowan, Ph.D.
Executive Director