

Lobstermen

Commercial Perspective

By Kelly Beal

Water LIFE,

Peace River Seafood

The life of the Florida Lobsterman - what could be better? Getting top dollar for your catch, being on beautiful blue waters daily, the taste of the salt air dancing around you...sounds pretty good huh? It's about half a million dollars good because that's what it's gonna' take to get started on this dream endeavor! Let me break it down for you. First you have to have your SPL (salt water products license) with your RS (restricted species) endorsement as well as your C (crawfish) endorsement. That just cost about \$200. Then you have to purchase tag certificates. This is where it gets costly. The market price on tag certificates is between \$60 and \$80. That is just the tag. The trap is gonna cost about \$45 dollars. Of course, you would have to find someone to purchase the tags from and then you have to pay a transfer fee of \$2 per tag as well as a surcharge fee of \$5 or 25% of what you paid for the tag whichever is greater and that money goes to the commission. So that leaves you spending about \$150 per trap. Did I mention you need to get a couple thousand traps to make it worth

while? That's just the traps and tags, now add another 100 grand for boat and gear. Then after you spend all that cash it's still a gamble whether or not it's gonna be a good year! The amount of money the lobster fisherman has to put into his business is just incredible.

In 1995 the Legislature amended Chapter 370 of the Florida Statutes to establish the Florida Spiny Lobster Trap Certificate Program to promote stabilization, efficiency and resource protection in the lobster fishery by reducing the number of permitted traps. Reducing the total number of traps should increase the yield per trap and therefore maintain or increase overall catch levels.

The transferable trap certificate program started in 1992. At that time there were 3,696 people who held trap certificates. The landings for lobster in 1992 were 4.8 million pounds. At that point there were 825,170 traps involved. Fast forward to 1998 and the landings were 5.9 million pounds with 544,000 traps. At that point there were only 2,158 certificate owners. You may think it's strange that less traps caught more, but remember everything in nature is cyclic. The landings in 2006 were 4.75 million pounds. I talked to a buddy of mine last night and he said this year is a banner year. The guys are doing really good. The market price to the fisherman is \$6.75 a pound and their catching anywhere between 500 and 1200 pounds a day. They run about 2000 traps and let a trap sit for about 4 or 5 days. Hard work,



great pay, but always a gamble.

Huge conservation measures have been established to protect this amazing species. These measures include a prohibition on taking egg bearing females, size limitation, and a prohibition on taking females with a "V-notch" on their tale (which basically means they haven't bred yet and soon will). Lobsters shed their hard shell which allows them to grow and to mate. Mating occurs soon after the shed when the female shell is soft. They can have 5,000 to 100,000 eggs depending on her size and she will carry these eggs for up to a year and then attached to the underside of her tail for another 10 months. These baby lobsters will shed about 10 times the first year of their life. Then after that the shedding frequency decreases. They will ulti-

mately shed 25 times over the 5 to 8 years it takes to reach sexual maturity. Remember this when your enjoying those delicious lobsters. They've gone through a lot before reaching your table. Most lobsters are harvested at about a pound but they can grow to a weight of over 50 pounds!

So you're not a millionaire but you still want a taste of the good life. Not to fear you can take a couple of days off and go down to the keys to dive for lobster recreationally. You just need a saltwater fishing license with a crawfish permit (\$15.50) The two day sport season is always the last consecutive Wednesday and Thursday in July. The bag limit is 6 per person per day. Regular lobster season begins August 6 and ends March 31 at mid-night. No gear that could puncture the shell is allowed in your possession during the hunt. You must have a measuring gauge on you at all times. The carapace (main body, eye to beginning of tail) must be at least 3 inches. Always measure them before putting them in your catch bag, anything in your catch bag is considered in your possession. And for the love of God - stay away from the commercial traps, it's not only a felony to mess with the commercial guys traps, if the fishermen catch you you're gonna wish you got caught by the law instead!

Be respectful, be happy and be safe. Enjoy Florida Seafood and don't forget to stop by our fish market and restaurant on Hwy 17 in Punta Gorda.

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