Fishermen say crab catch seems to be clamming up

By DALE CURRY
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NEW ORLEANS — There's an old saying that crabs don't bite during Lent. This year fishermen are saying, they stopped before Christmas and even forgot to celebrate Mardi Gras.

According to many fishermen, processors and retailers in the blue-crab territory from here to the Gulf, the crab catch is the worst in years.

And the effect is felt elsewhere in such places as Baltimore where restaurants and retailers have raised prices to an all-time high and cannot meet their customers' demands.

Interestingly, the beady-eyed crustaceans are as good at hiding their lifestyles secrets as they are at burying themselves in the mud.

"You talk to 10 fishermen and you'll get 20 different stories," said Jules Nunez of Lafitte, who says the crab business is 90 percent off this winter.

In the same vein, you talk to 10 wholesalers, like Nunez, and you'll get as many reports on the severity of the shortage.

As to what causes such shortages, a reply from Frank Panepinto, a wholesaler of Harvey, articulated what most others appeared to be saying: "You're trying to find out what the people are trying to find out for centuries."

While nobody seems to know for sure, there is no shortage of answers. Some claim the crawlers are killing the baby crabs. Others say shell dredging is the villain. The winds get a lot of the blame, as do pollution, low tides, high tides, too much cold water, not enough cold water.

Jerald Horst, marine advisory officer of the LSU Cooperative Extension Service, said he thinks crabs go through cycles and that is a low point of a cycle.

"None of us know as much as we should about the cycles. We need more research," he said.

"I guess it's just nature," said Randy Mai, owner of Ed Martin Seafood Co. in Westwego, a seafood processor which does a crab business of $1.5 million annually.

"This is normally the off-season, but it's never been quite as bad as this year. It slowed down in August and never picked up like it usually does between August and December."

Wholesale prices are ranging between $10 and $11 a pound for lump crabmeat, Martin said. Last year, also a bad year, the prices fluctuated between $7.20 and $9, he said.

White crabmeat is sold wholesale for around $6 a pound, while claw crabmeat goes for about $5.

"We haven't figured it out," said Martin. "The crabs are just not there. The fishermen claim it's the northeast winds. Maybe the area was fished too hard this summer."

A fine specimen, but it's harder to find this year

Martin said south winds are the usual for this time of year. He said most of the crabs are out of the Gulf coast area from Housa to the mouth of the Mississippi River, and the inland lake areas near the Gulf. He said Lake Pontchartrain and areas north of the Gulf are best for crabs in summer.

Retail prices have jumped at seafood markets here, although restaurants appear to be absorbing the prices rather than reprimeding the menu.

Anna Christiana Duhan, whose family has been in the retail seafood business for decades, watched a refrigerated truck roll up to her Oak Street business, shook her head and said, "There's no crabs. There's no crab man now. He usually brings us 40 dozen, but we'll be lucky if we have 10." Recalling other winters, Mrs. Duhan said the off-seasons are "usually hard but never this hard. I never remember it this high or this scarce."

In Christiana's Seafoods, the boiled crabs sold this week for $3.50 to $3.75 per dozen, depending on size, and lump crabmeat went for $9.99 per pound, $1.50 more than last year, she said.

Frank Tullos, owner of Riverside Seafood in River Ridge, said this year's catch is "probably the worst we've had since 1976."

Tullos attributes much of the shortage to shell dredging, an intrusion he believes is harmful to the delicate balance of nature in the lake bottoms where reproduction takes place.

"That and dumping raw sewage," he said. "Anytime you keep putting poison in, it's going to take its toll on the crabs."

Tullos, who operates one of the metropolitan area's largest retail seafood stores, this past week was selling a bushel of live crabs for $23 to $25, about $2 more than last year. Although he is paying fishermen more for his crabs, Tullos said, he has plenty since he is willing to pay for them.

Jeager's, a two-restaurant and seafood market operation, got its largest delivery in months on Thursday when a supplier brought in 30 baskets.

"We've been down to six to 12 baskets a week, and some weeks none," said Larry D'Antoni, manager of the Elysian Fields restaurant, next door to the seafood market.

Jeager's, which recently opened a lakefront restaurant, is one of the city's oldest restaurants specializing in seafood. While Jeager's takeout customers, as well as customers in the seafood market, must pay higher prices, those who dine in the restaurants are not charged the extra cost.

"We can't raise the price because it's on the menu," said D'Antoni.

Prices are up 20 percent, according to D'Antoni, who sees the crab business as no different this winter from other winters.

"Everybody's winter's about the same," he said. "You go through it every year. The weather conditions can control it to a degree for a few years."

Louisiana statistics from the National Marine Fisheries Service indicate December of 1982 was better for crabs, with two million pounds, than December of 1981, with 1.1 million pounds. Statistics for January were not available.

"It's so slow this time of year because of the cold weather. You can't say whether it's up or down," said Orville Allen, a statistics supervisor with the fisheries service, which is an arm of the U.S. Department of Commerce.

Noting that the best crab season is May through the summer months, he said crabs burrow in winter and are harder to catch.

As for what the crabs might do now, he said, "We don't have any idea what it might be in these coming months until May. If it warms up, they might get to the traps."

Richard Pomes, manager of Ralph and Kacoo's Seafood Restaurant in the French Quarter, said his suppliers say it's the worst shortage in 10 years. He said his prices have not gone up but that he had to take the lump crabmeat salad off the menu.

A conflicting opinion came from a spokesman for Fitzgerald's Seafood Restaurant, a popular spot on the city's lakefront. That report was "no problems whatsoever."

Panepinto, whose seafood enterprises do a half-million dollars in crab business per year, says bad periods such as this one are usually followed by appearances of the large male crabs, followed by the soft shells and sponge crabs.

So, surprised Panepinto, "that means they must have been doing something out there."