La. blue crab lovers singing blues amid declining catches

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NEW ORLEANS—It's been a bad winter and a terrible March for Louisiana crab catches, and nobody's quite sure why.

"There's been a month, a month and a half when we weren't able to get any," said Steve Somers, owner of the Crab Happy restaurant in White Hall, Md.

Now, at last, he is finding crabs, but paying at least one-third more for them, and they're pricey for his customers — $16 to $18 a dozen, compared to $14 to $16 a year ago.

Maryland, Louisiana, Virginia and North Carolina harvest nearly 80 percent of the nation's blue crabs. But when the winter cold sends the crabs burrowing under Chesapeake Bay, Louisiana provides nearly all of the crabs.

Crabs are always scarce in the winter and scarcest in March, even here in the South. But this March has been the worst in some time.

"People are coming in with pounds instead of hundreds of pounds," said Margo Brumley, part owner of Willton Inc., a seafood dealer in Cocodrie.

Baltimore crab lovers Arthur and Diane Weiner paid $45 in a restaurant last year for a dozen jumbos. The price includes the atmosphere of a waterfront restaurant, where it's fun to take a hammer and bang away at the shells, Diane Weiner said.

"It's the only time you can get that messy as an adult. It's really fun," she said. "And the taste is wonderful."

The price will probably hit $60 for a dozen jumbos this year, and Arthur Weiner said they'll pay it.

"We will?" his wife asked.

"Yes, we will."

"Better eat the shells, then," she responded.

Somers is paying $90 to $100 a bushel for North Carolina crabs, well above his average of $75 for this time of year, and even more for Louisiana crabs. During the warmer months, he said, they'll cost $45 or $50 a bushel.

"No figures are available yet on Louisiana's catch this year, but last year it produced 45 million pounds."

"Why has Louisiana had such a hard time supplying the demand?"

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Fishermen say limits on catching redfish and other species have let their populations grow so big that they are eating all the crabs.

Biologists doubt that theory.

Blue crabs themselves are just as big a menace to baby crabs, and scores of other fish also eat them, said Vince Guillory, a crab specialist in the state Department of Wildlife and Fisheries.

Brumley and her husband, Bill, blame too few laws protecting young crabs, and crabbers and distributors who ignore the laws that do exist.

In any event, crab populations run in five- to seven-year cycles.

Weather, water quality and the currents that carry crab larvae in and out of the bays and wetlands have a lot to do with the cycles.

Biologists are still trying to learn all the factors, Guillory said.