



Ask the lobster doc

by Diane Cowan, PhD
 Executive Director, The Lobster Conservancy, <www.lobsters.org>
 This column provides lobster health and handling information.
 If you have questions or concerns, contact Cowan at
 (207) 832-8224 or e-mail <dcowan@lobsters.org>.

Why the spring fishery falls short

I live beside a lobster pound that has been converted to a research observation cove, so I watch lobster behavior throughout the year. The mating shelters in the pound have two entrances that lobsters barricade with piles of rocks and gravel when they do not wish to be disturbed for various reasons.

For example, lobsters hide out inside fully barricaded shelters throughout the

winter. Each spring, I wait and watch for male lobsters to open the doors and start making preparations to lure females inside.

It won't be big news to anyone that inshore adult lobsters hunker down and do just about nothing but breathe in the winter.

They don't seem to do much during the spring months either. While young

juveniles are already active by late April or early May, inshore adult lobsters become active toward late spring/early summer.

The relative lack of lobster activity in springtime is reflected in a low proportion – 10% or less in recent years – of landings coming from the spring fishery.

Although Maine lobster landings have increased overall, the trend in the proportion of lobsters landed during the spring has decreased over time. This is somewhat surprising because, over the same period of time, spring water temperatures have trended upward.

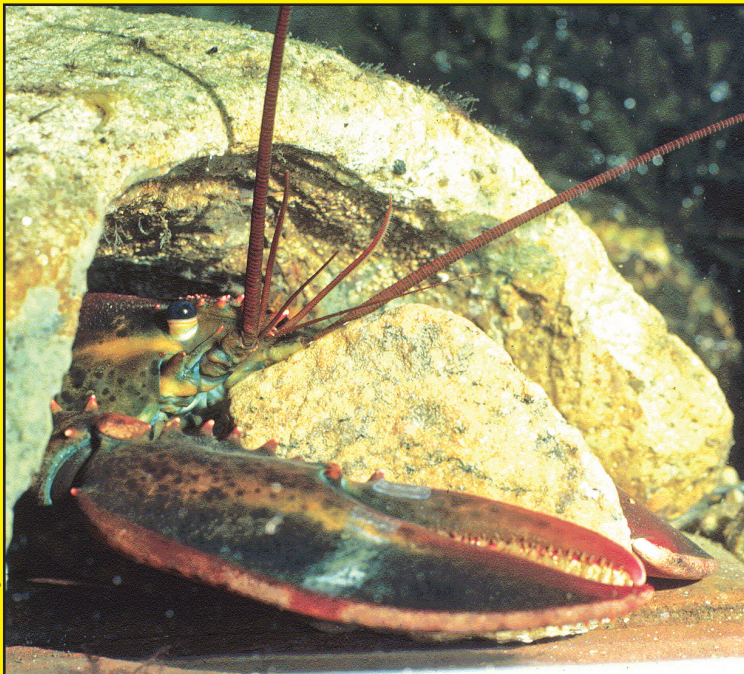
It's also surprising because if smaller lobsters become active earlier than larger lobsters and there are more lobsters within one molt of the minimum legal size in the landings, then wouldn't you expect a higher proportion of spring lobsters?

Not necessarily. If nearly all of the lobsters of legal size were captured the previous fall, spring traps could be full of undersized and oversized lobsters but not many keepers. Having relatively fewer harvestable lobsters in the spring means waiting for lobsters to shed into the legal size for capture before landing them.

Maybe if more lobsters that molted into harvestable size were left to overwinter, then the proportions of lobsters caught in spring would go back up. The price is better in the spring, so that might bolster local economies.

Maybe, at the same time, there could be more select lobsters – also worth more money – to catch throughout the year. Certainly, if more soft female lobsters were left on the bottom, they would have an opportunity to harden up and egg out.

I'm not sure how to accomplish an increase in the proportion of spring lobsters, but it's certainly worth thinking about. ■



Lobster pulling rock into shelter entrance to close the door.

Below, proportion of lobsters landed in Maine during April (blue), May (red), and June (black) from 1994-2009. Data source: Maine Department of Marine Resources.

Diane Cowan photo

Diane Cowan graph

