

The Florida Crawfish Industry

The catching and shipping of Florida Lobsters (Spiny Lobsters) was started at Key West by Thompson Fish Co., (now Thompson Enterprises, Inc.) about forty years ago (1918). At that time these lobsters were found in abundance and nearly all of those produced were caught with "bullies" (a circular metal frame with a tapered net around it affixed to the end of slender pole). In later years the fishermen started catching them with "Grabs," a scissor arrangement on the end of a slender pole, which could be closed over the body of the lobster by pulling a string. Lobster traps were not used to any great extent until recent years. At least 95% of all Florida production is now from traps.

In the beginning all of the lobsters produced were cooked, and the meat from the tails was packed in 1 lb. slipcover cans. These cans of meat were packed in barrels with ice and shipped by Express to Fulton Market, New York, where it was sold as a substitute for Maine Lobsters. We next started shipping the live lobsters packed in barrels with alternate layers of ice and sponge clippings (small pieces of sponges which were cut from the whole sponges in order for them to present a neat appearance when shipped. At that time the sponge industry was thriving in Key West and there were sponge clippings in abundance). The idea of using the sponge clippings in packing the lobsters for shipment was to keep the ice from direct contact with the lobsters. When shipped in this manner the lobsters arrived at destination alive. In view of the fact that Maine lobsters were delivered alive, the purchasers of Florida Lobsters insisted on receiving them alive. When sponge clippings became scarce sea weed was used as a substitute in packing the live lobsters, The buyers of Florida Lobsters finally became convinced that it was not essential to keep them alive in transit, so the sponge clippings and sea weed were eliminated from the packing. The demand for whole cooked lobsters and lobster tails has gradually supplanted the demand for fresh meat packed in cans, and for the whole fresh lobsters.

For many years the commercial production of Florida Lobsters was carried on without any conservation laws to protect them, and as a result the annual production dwindled rapidly. These lobsters spawn from about mid March until mid-August, but the heaviest spawn is found April through July. About twenty years ago we succeeded in getting the first Conservation Law which provided a closed season of three months. This did not provide sufficient protection and the supply continued to diminish. AS a result, the closed season was extended to four months each year. The Florida Conservation for three years with the help of U. S. Bureau of Fisheries, and this hatchery contributed greatly in increasing the supply.

Since that time the fisherman and dealers have found the business profitable year after year. The history of conservation in the Florida Lobster industry is proof that conservation pays big dividends.

Crawfish production statistics show that in 1940, 46:3,500 pounds of crawfish were produced with a value of 8:31,000 to the fishermen. In 1949, 1,481,000 pounds were produced with a value of \$188,700 to the fishermen. In 1957, approximately 4,000,000 pounds were landed, worth approximately \$1,000,000 at the fishermen's level.

The market for the crawfish, or Florida rock lobster, at the present time is principally a Southern one; the State of Florida using the major portion of the production. The bulk of the crawfish is marketed as whole green or whole cooked. A small percentage, however, is processed and sold as lobster tails.

Most United States fishing industries have been adversely affected by foreign imports. However, the most dominant factor contributing to the growth of the Florida crawfish industry was the importation of lobster tails from South Africa. Following World War 11, large quantities of frozen lobster tails were shipped to this country. Being a frozen commodity, distribution was made throughout the United States, principally to markets unavailable to the Northern lobster producers. The South African rock lobster tail industry enjoyed a rapid expansion, a result of good promotional effort, quality standards, and proper grading and packaging. Spiny lobster imports rose from 461,000 lbs. in 1946 to 9,000,000 pounds in 1949. In 1955, imports had risen to 22,479,000 pounds. Today, many foreign countries are competing for this lucrative lobster tail market.

The Florida crawfish industry has benefited greatly from this nation-wide advertising campaign. Millions 4 people have become familiar with this sea food product This development and the rapid expansion of the Florida tourist industry have resulted in an ever-increasing demand for the Florida crawfish, or Florida rock lobster. Thus, the marketing problem of the early years of the industry was gradually eased. Since the 1955-56 crawfish season, lobster producers have been unable, for the most part, to match supply with the demand. This has resulted in increasingly larger amounts of live crawfish being imported from the Bahama Islands. Because of this strong market situation in the South, little effort has been made to sell the Florida rock lobster in the North. Here, however, it is believed, a vast potential market exists. Properly graded, cooked, frozen Florida crawfish should be introduced to the Northern market areas.

Two things which are vital to any fishing industry are adequate production and good demand.

This applies to all those directly engaged - the fishermen, producers, and distributors. There is little doubt that demand for crawfish will continue to increase. However, while the number of pounds of crawfish produced has been doubled over a period of five years due to more intensive fishing effort, there are indications that overfishing in many areas has occurred. Although the crawfish industry has the protection of good conservation measures, such as a closed season during spawning and prohibiting the catching of crawfish under one pound, the serious problem facing the industry is one of production.

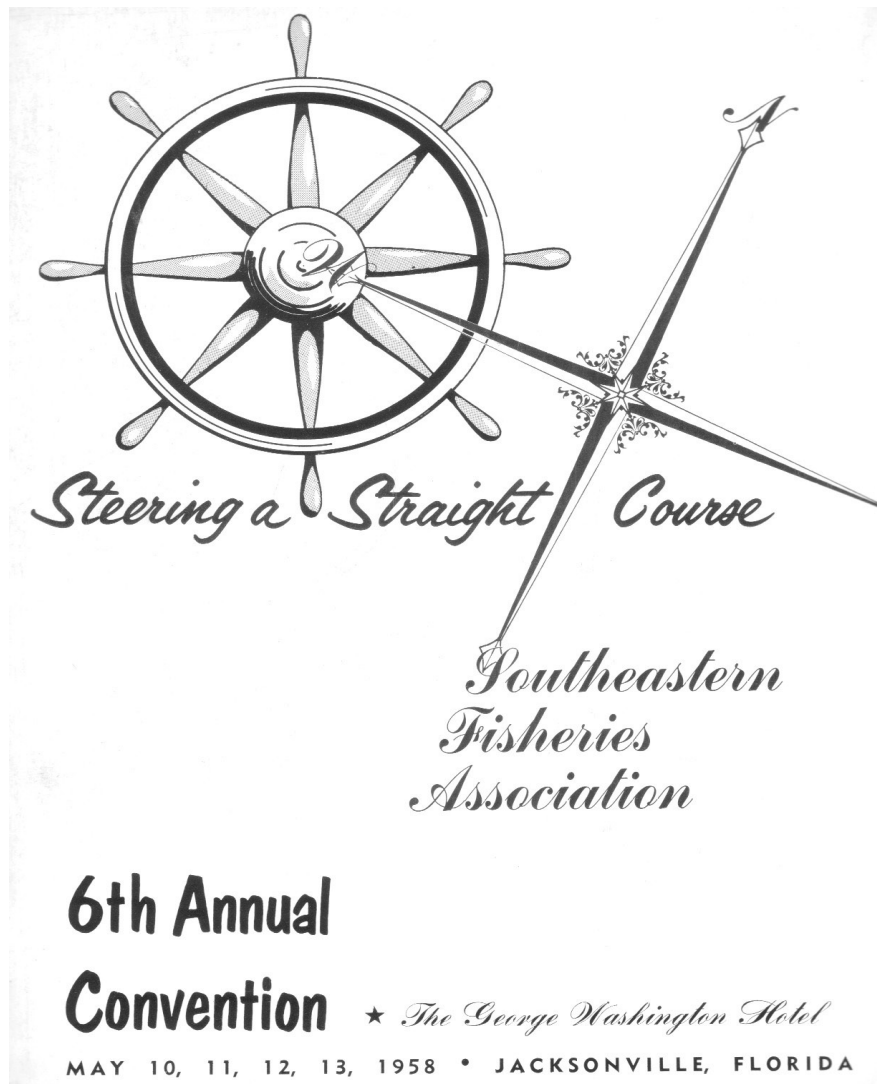
Due to the relatively small size of this industry, little research has been devoted to the crawfish. It has been established that a one pound crawfish is six years old; that mating begins in late February or March, continuing through May and June, with the majority of the females releasing their eggs before August; and that from tagging experiments conducted migrational tendencies are not apparent. It is believed by some, who have had long experience in the fishery, that the crawfish population may be divided into two groups - the school crawfish and the residual crawfish.

The school crawfish may be likened to a swarm of locusts that move over land areas in search of food. The school crawfish roves the deeper water and is a hardy, strong creature. The term "run" is used by crawfishermen when one of these large schools happen to come into the relatively shallow areas where crawfish are trapped. The residual crawfish are those individuals who have broken away from one of the big schools, seeking the sheltered inshore waters. It is believed that the bulk of the production of crawfish comes from the residual crawfish populations. Intensive fishing in many areas has reduced the residuals to a point where fishing has become economically unprofitable. Inshore residual crawfish are constantly being replaced, but not rapidly enough, however, to make fishing profitable for the larger number of fishermen recently entering the fishery. In some areas, fishermen, deliberately bypassing the residuals, have concentrated on location schools of crawfish and have found fishing more profitable

Although crawfish production has increased in the area presently being fished each year, the point of peak production has probably been reached. In order to avoid lowering in production, it seems advisable for the fishermen through the use of larger boats, to find new areas of production in deeper water areas.

It is a characteristic in this country that before thorough scientific research is conducted on a particular fishery the fishery must have become either physically or economically depleted.

The crawfish industry of Florida, although a small industry, is growing and can continue to grow. Demand is increasing and fishing is becoming more intensive



This article published in this 1958 SFA Convention booklet. It was written either by Robert M. Ingle of the Florida Board of Conservation or Clare P. Idyll of the University of Miami.

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