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# One Square Mile: Lobstermen And Scientists Team Up To Collect Data On Lobsters

By [AMBAR ESPINOZA \(/PEOPLE/AMBAR-ESPINOZA\)](#) • OCT 7, 2014

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*It's another busy day out at sea for Captain Brian Thibeault. From Point Judith, he's steered his lobster fishing boat 20 miles offshore. He's released a long rope with 15 lobster traps filled with bait overboard.*

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Lobster populations in Southern New England were booming in the 1990s. Since then, their numbers have declined, from more than 36 million lobsters in 1997 to about 14 million in 2007. But commercial fishermen in Rhode Island say lobsters are making a comeback. And a pilot program in place today is giving lobster fishermen an opportunity to work with state and federal managers to collect data about the lobster populations in Narragansett Bay and the Rhode Island and Block Island sounds.



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It's another busy day out at sea for Captain Brian Thibeault. From Point Judith, he's steered his lobster fishing boat 20 miles offshore. He's released a long rope with 15 lobster traps filled with bait overboard in a straight line.

With the help of a machine called a hydraulic hauler, he brings the traps back on board. He and his deck hand swiftly remove the lobsters from the trap, measure them, throw some into buckets and others overboard, put more bait in the traps, and do it all over again.

This past year, he's added another tool: a digital tablet. His lobster fishing boat is one of 12 participating in a program called the On Deck Data program.

As a participant, Thibeault collects and shares information about some of his lobster catch with state and federal scientists who monitor fish stocks. A specially designed app on the tablet will tell Thibeault which lobster traps he should randomly sample. He does this three times a month. On each of those three trips, he samples 100 lobsters or 20 traps – whichever comes first.

As he pulls up his lobster traps, he begins to record specific details about each of the lobsters in his sample: the sex, the length of the carapace, or the upper shell of the lobster, and whether the lobsters have shell disease and how bad it is.



[http://mediad.publicbroadcasting.net/p/wrni/files/putting\\_more\\_bait.JPG](http://mediad.publicbroadcasting.net/p/wrni/files/putting_more_bait.JPG)

*Captain Brian Thibeault (left) and deck hand Sean Moreschi re-bait their lobster traps.*

CREDIT AMBAR ESPINOZA / RIPR



In his sample, he caught a few egg-bearing females, lobsters that were too small to keep, and lobsters with soft shells. Fishermen don't keep recently molted lobsters, giving them a chance to harden their shells.

Thibeault will also make a note of any female lobsters with a V notch. That's a mark on the tail flipper put on by commercial fishermen to identify and protect a known breeding lobster from harvest.

"What's nice about the On Deck data program, you just saw there were 6 lobsters in that pot. I get to keep one," he said. "Five went overboard, but nobody at home knows that."

Thibeault recognizes that the lobster population has dramatically declined, but he and other lobster fishermen say they work in areas where the lobster populations are recovering. They believe what they're required to do to help rebuild the lobster population is working: throwing back young lobsters, or female lobsters with eggs or soft shells.

"We're showing that there's whole bunch of little lobsters that are all different ages and that they'll all grow up to be big, mature lobsters for us," he said.

Scientists have more information about lobsters in the inshore areas, such as in Narragansett

Bay, than they do from the offshore areas. The offshore areas are more difficult to get to and more expensive to send a biologist out on a boat to collect information. And more than half of Rhode Island lobster fishermen work in the offshore areas.

"At least with that on deck data, when I put it on the tablet, they [the scientists] can see that there is still a discard going on in the fishery of juvenile lobsters," Thibeault said. "And that is part of why I wanted to join that fleet."

The fleets participating in this program cover areas from the southern gulf of Maine all the way to the Hudson Canyon off the coast of New Jersey. It extends from the coast lines of southern New England states to canyons along the continental shelf 200 miles offshore.



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*Captain Brian Thibeault releases all egg-bearing females he catches in his lobster traps. Egg-bearing females are legally protected from harvest.*

CREDIT AMBAR ESPINOZA / RIPR

And they're collecting the same information that Thibeault is punching into his tablet: the exact location of where they're fishing, how deep, and even bottom water temperature.

"That's all very, very important information to the biologists to understand what's going on with the overall population," said Peg Parker, the executive director of the Commercial Fisheries Research Foundation, the organization that proposed, funded, and launched this pilot project.

The foundation compiles and stores all the data from the twelve vessels.

"We take a look at it [the data] for quality control," said Parker. "And every six months, we send a copy of that database to the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission for the purpose of using that data in lobster stock assessments."

By the end of his day, Thibeault has hauled more than 200 lobster traps. But lobsters aren't the only catch Thibeault harvested. He also caught Jonah crabs, typically considered a bycatch. The number of lobsters has declined, but Jonah crabs are growing in number and there's a market for them.

On his way back to Point Judith, Thibeault stopped by a wholesale dealer to sell both live lobsters and crabs before docking his boat.

Right now, Jonah crabs are free for all catch in New England, because no one's monitoring them. In Massachusetts, it was the 5th most valuable species last year, according to David Spencer, president of the Commercial Fisheries Research Foundation. He and local fishermen expect Jonah crabs to become one of Rhode Island's most valuable species, too.

Inspired by the lobster data collection program, lobster fishermen wanted to stay ahead of the game, so they recently started to collect information about Jonah crabs. And fisheries scientists plan to include that data in a forthcoming management plan.

"We're very excited to have these lobstermen engaged in the process and collecting samples in areas that are difficult for us to get to," said Genny Nesslage, senior stock assessment scientist at the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission.



[http://mediad.publicbroadcasting.net/p/wrni/files/jonah\\_crab.JPG](http://mediad.publicbroadcasting.net/p/wrni/files/jonah_crab.JPG)

*In the southern New England area in particular, most of the offshore lobster fleets have become highly dependent on harvesting Jonah crabs throughout the course of the year. The Jonah crab population is increasing pretty rapidly. It's an unmanaged species. The fleets participating in the On Deck Data program will be one of the prime data sources for the upcoming Jonah crab management plan.*

CREDIT AMBAR ESPINOZA / RIPR

“As scientists, we're always eager to incorporate good data sources into our stock assessments and the Commercial Fisheries Research Foundation is collecting samples, in particular at sea in areas that are under sampled by state and federal sampling programs. So we're eager to get more information from those areas, to try to characterize both the fishery and the health of the stock.”

A steering committee of both federal and state scientists and the fishing industry designed the data collection process from day one.

This program has been going on for more than a year and it has one more year to go. The Commercial Fisheries Research Foundation used leftover federal money to pay for it, and it's looking for more money to keep it going.

Lobster fishermen Mark Sweitzer hopes their fundraising is successful.

“It's great to have data for a couple of years, but you need to see a timeline to reflect what's really going on,” said Sweitzer. “Most of the areas I've fished for 30-40 years and I still don't know have it figured out.”

Sweitzer said the more information about lobsters is collected, the more accurate the picture of the lobster population will be. He said that's important for a sustainable industry and the livelihood of lobster fishermen.

Do you have insight or expertise on this topic? Please email us, we'd like to hear from you: [news@ripr.org](mailto:news@ripr.org) (<mailto:news@ripr.org>).

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