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Florida's stone crab season opens Friday amid concerns over consumer demand

SEAFOOD.COM NEWS [St. Petersburg Times] By Terry Tomalin - October 12, 2010 -
Come Friday, the opening day of stone crab season, Dave Mistretta starts thinking about the price of the coveted shellfish.

'If there are not a lot of crabs but people still want them, then the price will be high,' said Mistretta, who lives in Indian Rocks Beach. 'But if there are a lot of crabs and people don't want them, then the price will be low. It's all a matter of supply and demand.'

Last year, Mistretta sold his stone crab claws for about \$8 a pound, roughly the same price he got for them 20 years ago. 'We had a lot of crabs, but people just weren't buying them because of the economy,' he said. At the same time, the cost of fuel, traps, rope and bait has gone up in those years. 'Hopefully, we will have tons of crabs and people will be hungry,' he said.

But what really worries Mistretta is the prospect of lingering oil from the Deepwater Horizon spill in the gulf. 'Hopefully, there's none of it out there just waiting to get churned up by a winter cold front,' he said. 'That could ruin our season.' Ever the optimist, Mistretta is ready to hit the water and pull the traps he was allowed to set 10 days before the season opens. He has until May 15, the end of the season, to snap up the succulent shellfish. 'You have to go for it,' he said. 'This is the hardest work I have ever done, and I love it.'

Florida's crab

While stone crabs are found from North Carolina to the Yucatan Peninsula and east through the Bahamas and the Greater Antilles, Florida is the commercial capital for the shellfish.

Last year commercial stone crabbers harvested 2.4 million crab claws with a dockside value of nearly \$19 million. More than 95 percent of those came from the Gulf of Mexico.

The stone crab has the honor of being the only sustainable marine resource in the United States. The crabs have two tasty, meat-filled claws, but when a diver, commercial fisherman or recreational stone-crabber grabs one of these appendages and applies a little pressure, the animal simply lets it go.

In theory, conservation-minded individuals can have their crab and eat it too, since the animal should be returned to the water with a means of defending itself.

But there is skill involved; remove a claw the wrong way, and you kill the crab.

The claw

Research has shown that about 20 percent of the claws measured in fish houses were regenerated, proof a crab can survive after being declawed.

Most stone crabs have one claw that is larger than the other. The large crushing claw, the one most prized for the dinner table, is the animal's principal weapon.

A fully developed crab is strong enough to crush clams and oysters, so imagine what it can do to an index finger. That is why divers and crabbers take great care when handling these crustaceans.

From sea to table

Most crabs are taken in commercial traps, and their claws are sold to seafood houses where

they are cooked and cooled immediately to keep the meat from sticking to the shell.

The process is simple: boil the claw for eight minutes at 160 degrees, flush in cool, fresh water and then cover with ice.

Stone crabs usually are graded into three sizes. The average is 3 to 5 ounces, but occasionally a crabber might come across a true 'jumbo' weighing nearly a pound.

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