

How to Lobster



Lobsters are once again plentiful in Maine. It has been one of the most successful aquaculture experiments to date, and its success is due to innovations instituted by the lobster fishermen themselves to protect their livelihood and thereby protect the lobster population. I had the opportunity to go out this summer with Bob, a real lobsterman, to help haul in 30 of his 100 traps. There were so many things to know and do and I pestered him with questions which he patiently answered all the while letting me take photos. Lobstering is really hard work and learning even the most basic things such as where to locate the bait inside the trap doesn't come in a book. Lobstering is competitive, fuel is expensive, and traps are expensive. It's not about what to have for dinner - it's about making a living. You may be sure a lobsterman (or woman) is not about to share tricks that they themselves learned the hard way.

If you are going to be a lobsterer you are supposed to learn the hard way as well. But the information that the lobster fishermen came up with to ensure that there were plenty of lobsters to be caught in the future *was* shared: laws were enacted as information was accumulated and innovations in trap designs were made. The new rules to be followed showed results in an increase in the lobster population ensured the safety of a traditional way of life, the industry that surrounds it, and of an ecosystem. Learning all you all you need to know about how to lobster still won't be of much practical use because getting a commercial lobster license is only possible if 5 people give up their licenses (as in die) for the next person in line to get one. But even that limitation has the benefit of protecting the industry. And it is an industry: think tourism, t-shirts, artwork, license plates, cookware, bibs, restaurants, cookbooks, butter melters, claw crackers, soup at Costco, postcards, posters, fish tanks, bait suppliers, foul weather gear, mesh nets, inspectors, etc.

Step 1: Supplies



- Lobster trap
- Lobster license - if you are just going to eat them and not sell them then you may get a personal license for up to 5 traps (in Maine). Other states or countries will be different of course.
- A boat - not a dock.
- An electric winch would be a nice thing to have.
- Bait - there are rules and regulations about what can and cannot be used - check your area's rules.
- Buoy - painted with colors that are different than any other's around the area you want to fish.
- Line that will not rot, to attach the buoy to the trap.
- A cooler to put lobsters in
- A regulation double sided lobster measurer
- A brick (to help the trap sink)
- Butter and lemons

Step 2: Traps





This opening is for small lobsters to escape.



Another place for steel rings that will rust in case the trap is lost, so another opening to form for lobsters to get out.

The lobster trap of today is an amazing safety device for the preservation of lobsters - how strange is that?, something that is made to trap them for us to eat actually protects the population, keeps it strong and is one of the most instrumental modifications in ensuring that lobsters are plentiful again.

Traps can become lost from their buoys and when that happens they are pretty much gone for good. When that happens the lobsters inside die, then other lobsters come in and eat away at them, pretty soon hundreds of lobsters are filling the trap over time. But the traps are now made with metal rings that rust in the saltwater and then doors will open all around and there won't be any reason for lobsters to go inside and get caught forever.

Another great innovation are the escape spaces on the sides of traps to let out small lobsters, small lobsters can be attacked and eaten by larger ones inside of a trap. The escape openings are just the right size to let small lobsters escape and larger ones to stay put.

Step 3: Bait



Salted herring is used for bait, about 4 or 5 are put into a mesh bag and tied inside the trap.

Bob uses frozen salted herring. It won't rot as fast as simply frozen herring. When a trap is pulled up and the lobsters are taken out, the mesh bag that holds the bait is checked to see the condition or quantity of the bait. It probably will need a top up of herring or maybe even some really rotten herring should be tossed out.

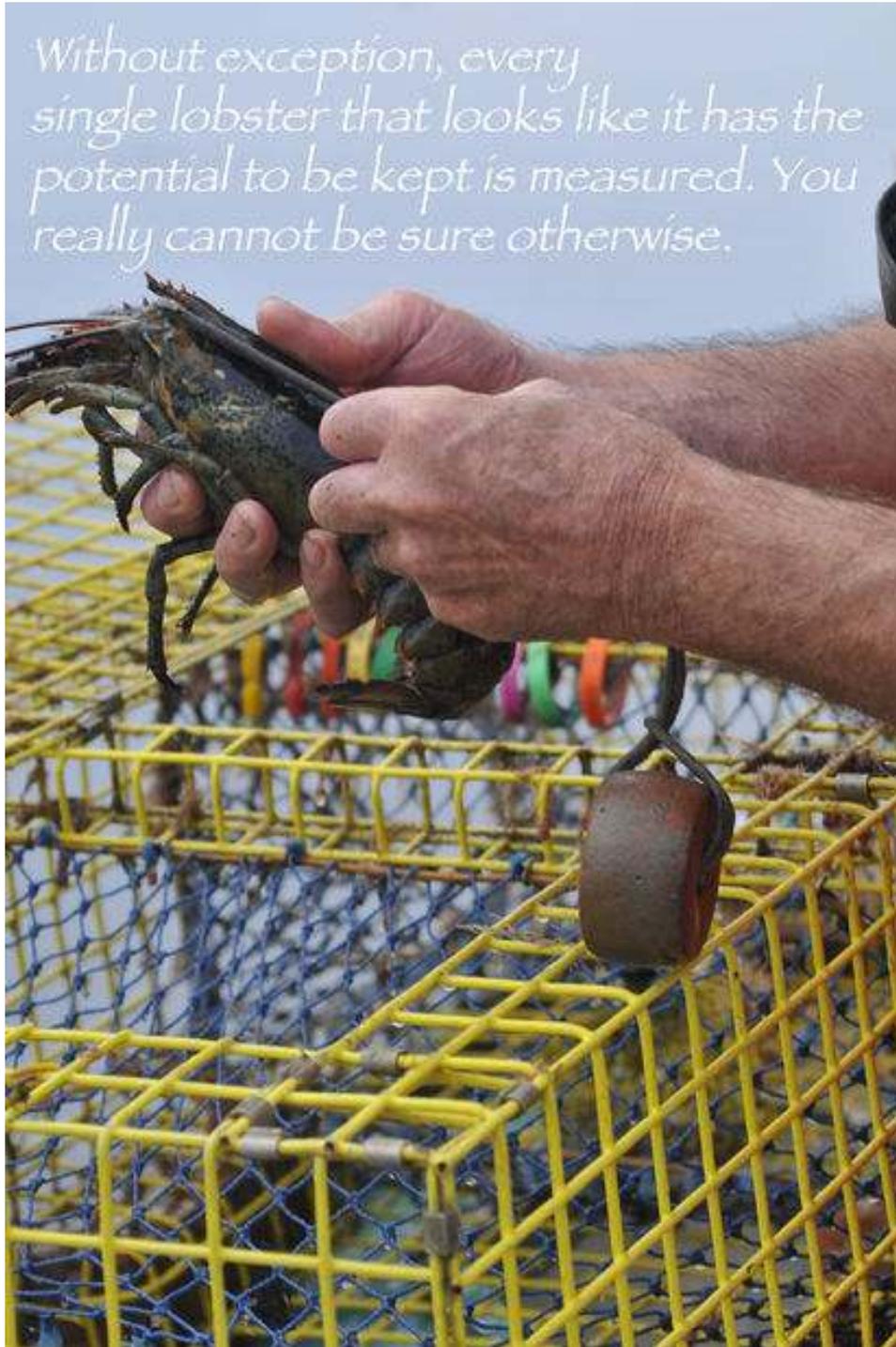
Where you place and attach the bag of bait is really important, if it is too close to the opening of course the lobsters won't go in. If it's too close the sides of your trap then lobsters could just pick at it from the outside of the trap and never go inside.

Step 4: Size



It takes about 5 years for a lobster to be large enough to be harvested. And it can take that long for them to breed. So measuring a lobster to be sure it has had a few breeding seasons to go is really important to protect the population as a whole.

Step 5: Proper Measurement



Proper measurement means measuring from the bottom of the eye socket to the bottom of the carapace: the measurement must be at least 3 1/4" but no larger than 5". There are hefty fines for taking a lobster that is too small or too large. And you can get into the same trouble if you are caught with lobster pieces - like tails. If you are caught with a lobster tail then there is no way to check the size that the whole lobster was. We found a lobster's tail in one trap, it was small and Bob said it was from other lobsters eating that lobster.

Step 6: Females



When a female lobster with eggs is caught she must be liberated right away, but first her tail needs to be checked for a V-shaped notch, if there's not one there already you have to put one into the right side of the middle. That notch will protect her from being harvested even if she is not carrying eggs. It will tell other lobster fishermen by a just a fast glance that she is a breeding female. Notches will survive for several molts of a female's shell as she grows, and if you catch her and see even a smallish notch you should notch her again.

She could be carrying 6,000 to 100,000 eggs but scientists think that only 1/10th of 1% make it to the minimum size for harvesting. Very poor odds. She will carry and protect those eggs for 6 to 11 months, fanning them with her swimmer flaps to oxygenate them.

Step 7: Protection = Success



Because of the trap innovations and harvesting restrictions that lobsterers themselves have come up with (and are now laws), lobsters are abundant once again. Prices might not reflect that because the prices of everything else that goes into being a lobsterer stay constant - fuel, bait, new traps, line, buoys etc. They are selling their catch to wholesalers at obviously wholesale prices. Then from there the lobsters may be kept alive in giant tanks to grow larger so they can be sold for more money, then sold to a store or a restaurant which of course has to pay more than a wholesaler and sell them for more to make a profit. The lobster you buy in a grocery store will probably have been sold and bought 3 times before you get to it.

Step 8: Dinner...Lunch...or Breakfast!



Lobster has been one of my favorite foods for my entire life, but nothing compares to eating a lobster on the same day it is caught. This was one of my all time best ever meals and I was ever so happy that Bob had let me have two to take home to cook. If I had been just a few seconds slower finding my camera Possum Bean would have been one happy dog, as it was all he got was my melted butter, and I had more in the fridge.