

SP# 14-B

THE CRAB FISHERY OF OREGON

The Pacific coast edible crab, Cancer magister, is much sought after by the people of Oregon. Many make their livelihood fishing for this crustacean, while many others catch them for personal use. On the market this savory product appears in a variety of forms -- in the shell, fresh picked crab meat, frozen crab meat and canned crab meat.

The fishery takes place on various offshore grounds along Oregon's 300 mile coast line with 45% of the state's total landings for 1948 coming from the Astoria region, 18% from Coos Bay, 12% from Yaquina Bay, 10% from Tillamook Bay, 8% from Umpqua River, 4% from Port Orford and 3% from miscellaneous landings elsewhere. A negligible amount of commercial fishing takes place within bays.

Because of the very nature of the biology of the edible crab months in which it is fished are limited. It is in the late summer months, August, September, October, the crabs are soft-shelled, the cause being the phenomenon of shedding the exoskeleton. This exposes a perfectly formed but soft shell. Marketing is undesirable at this time because of low yield and poor quality of the resulting crab meat. After an approximate three month period, during which time the shell becomes hard and the meat firm, fishing resumes.

Winter limits the fishing intensity due to storms and other uncertainties of the weather. It is not until the month of March that any appreciable landings are made. March, April and May are the peak production months resulting in 60% of the year's catch in 1948.

Existing closed seasons for the protection of the soft-shelled crabs, August 15 to November 15 in the southern area and September 15

to December 15 in the northern area, limits production to the bays during this time as no closed season is now in effect for the various bays. Further regulations prohibit the landing of female crabs, this adding assurance to successful spawning. A size limit of six and one-quarter inches on offshore males (straight-line measurement across the back in front of the points) and five and three-quarter inches on male crabs found within the bays concludes the main regulations affecting the fishery.

The crab fishery of Oregon is a relatively new one, the history more or less beginning in 1930. Prior to 1930 steel crab pots were not in use. In fact, the only fishing for crabs at that time was with the ring net (crab ring). About 1930 ring nets and a few wooden traps were first tried on the open coast. Several years later the first steel pots were put into use. Since that time there has been a steadily increasing fishery.

A peak production was reached in 1943 of 9,200,000 pounds, the largest of the fishery. This large production was evidently due to an increased number of pots over the previous year and the fact that areas previously not fished steadily were then utilized. The production since 1943 has averaged 7,365,000 pounds annually with no appreciable change in the fishing intensity and with no apparent depletion of the stocks.

During the latter part of the summer many crab fishermen bring their gear in and go fishing for albacore. It is usually during this time the industry raises the price of crabs in hopes of maintaining a supply. The California crab season opening a month earlier than Oregon's also affects the price of crabs. The overall success of the season is in direct relationship with the price of crabs.

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Bay produced crabs in particular are susceptible to fluctuating prices. They bring their highest price during the offshore closed season and their lowest when the supply of ocean crabs is greatest.

During the past five years the trend has been towards larger boats handling more pots. In effect this gives a wider fishing range. With the installation of live tanks in the hold of the boat the fisherman may remain out of port for three or four days without danger of mortality in captured crabs.

Although further biological research is needed for confirmation, the protective soft-shell season, the size limits on male crabs and the protection of the female crabs will probably insure the fishery many years at its present level of intensity.

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