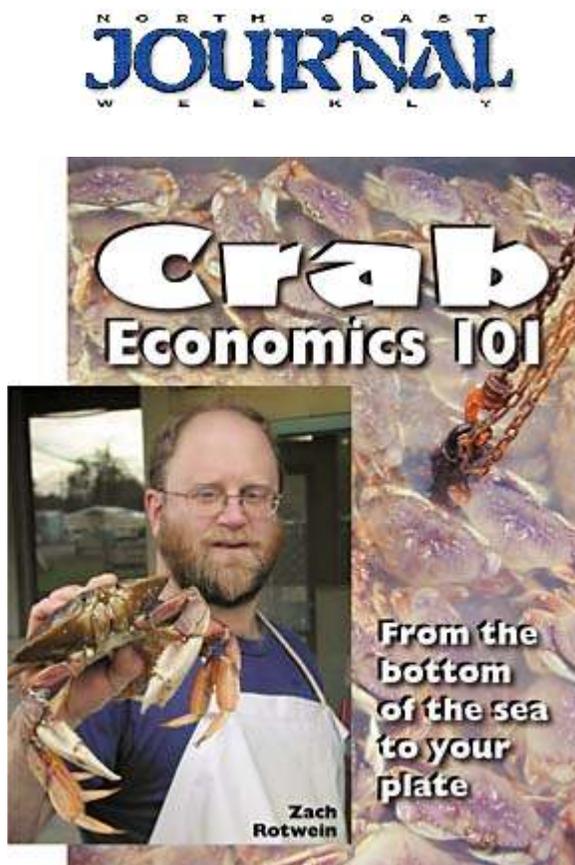


ON THE COVER



Story & photos by ARNO HOLSCHUH

WHEN ZACH ROTWEIN WAS GROWING UP IN MARYLAND his mother would often lose him in the grocery store. They'd go in together, but as soon as her back was turned, Rotwein would wander off. She always knew where to find him, though -- at the seafood case.

"I'd be there asking the fishmonger where each kind of fish was caught," he said. "One day, it dawned on me that you could make a living catching these things."

Making a living off of the sea is just what Rotwein now does, both as the captain of the 30-foot fishing boat Sundown and as the proprietor of Cap'n Zach's Crab House in McKinleyville. Some years he makes a very good living, once turning an \$80,000 profit. Other years, he's lucky to break even. The 2001-02 crab season is one of those "other" years.

For crabbers to survive in the long run, "You need a good price and decent quantity" and this year has neither. In a good year Rotwein will harvest thousands of pounds of crab



and fill his boat in a few hours. This year he can spend 12 hours on the water and only bring 600 pounds into the dock. To top it off, the price per pound that crab processors are paying has gone down over last year.

It's just another chapter in the history of North Coast crab fishing, where the price and amount of crab harvested vary widely from year to year. It puts Rotwein -- and other crabbers -- on a pendulum swinging between caviar and humble pie.

But why? What biological factors lead to feast one year and famine the next? What determines the price a fisherman can get in the crab fishery? One thing is for sure, said Rotwein: The only crabbers who will survive in the business are those who can find ways to deal with both biological and market fluctuations.

"The secret used to be to go out and fill your boat. Now the secret is to go out and get as many crab as you can -- and then get the most money for them," he said.



Zach Rotwein and his deckhand Jim Simmons pulling crab pots aboard the Sundown.

The importance of being aggressive

It's dark, cold and severely early -- 5:45 a.m. early. It doesn't bother Rotwein. He's down at the dock in Trinidad, slapping on his rain gear and clambering into the tiny boat he uses to row out to the Sundown. Early starts are part of being an aggressive crab fisherman, he said, and in this game only the aggressive survive.

"You gotta get out there, fish long hours, fish in rough weather," he said. "Really, unless the weather is death, you have to fish."

"There have been times we stayed up 42 hours straight crabbing, went home for four hours of sleep and went back out again. You get into that competitive mindset; there are only so many crabs out there, and while you're sleeping, someone else is pulling them up."

The Dungeness crab fishery operates on a different system from most others, because there are no limits on how many crabs can be caught. The crab fishery has two main regulations: No harvesting females and no males under six inches. The idea is to give male crabs a chance to reach sexual maturity and mate, and females a chance to carry those eggs to term.

That leaves a pool of legally sized male crabs -- and they belong to whoever gets them first. He who tries hardest gets the most before the supply is exhausted.



And you have to be ready to invest in a lot of gear. Rotwein has 350 crab pots in the water, each of them worth around \$100. He also owns a crab fishing license worth about \$16,000. Together, they represent a \$51,000 investment -- not including his boat, maintenance or crew.



Putting forth a lot of effort and cash is vital, because it allows you to get your share of the crab catch, he said. That's especially true early in the season.

When the season opens in December, boats can bring back literally tons of crab a day. Those who dawdle do not win: By the end of the season in early summer, boats might be lucky to get 300 pounds per trip; there just aren't many legal crabs left to catch.

The intensive fishing effort doesn't seem to be hurting the crab's biological condition, said Dave Hankin, fisheries biologist at Humboldt State University. "The population has persisted in spite of fishing. In that sense it is sustainable fishery."



But while the crab population is biologically sustainable, it could hardly be called stable. Dungeness crab naturally experience wild fluctuation in population, zooming from peaks to troughs -- like this year -- on a roughly decade-long cycle.

"The last good year we had around here was the 1995-96 season," Rotwein said. He left Trinidad with his crew when the season opened at midnight and by 4:30 a.m., the boat had begun to sink under the weight of the crab they had collected. "We had 10,000 pounds in four and a half hours," he said.

Now, five years later, he finds himself in the bottom of the cycle. When he pulled his pots on the first day of the 2001-2002 season, he got just 1,600 pounds in 10 hours of

work.

"There were some long faces," he said.

Tough years in the crab fishery are harder now than they were in years past, because the other commercial species on which fishermen relied are no longer available.

Crab represents the last man standing in terms of commercial fishing on the North Coast. Salmon fishing has been heavily curtailed since the late 1980s because of concerns over their viability as a species. Similar concerns have effectively brought the once-lucrative rockfish industry to a grinding halt as well.

"It used to be that the guys who owned the boats, in order to get crew members, would say, 'If you want to fish the salmon season, you have to come out and fish crab as well.' Then the salmon fishing wasn't as good, so it was: 'If you want to do crab fishing, you have to come salmon fishing, too.'

"Now, all we have is crab."

This means that crab fishing is getting more attention from fishermen now than ever before. The incentive to set more and more pots in the water, always present, is growing even more. It has the potential to put the squeeze on crabbers, because the number of crabs isn't increasing -- but the cost to try and get your share of the crabs is.

The extremely intense fishing methods may even be reducing the economic value of the fishery, and some people are trying to find ways to fight the push for more pots (see [related article](#) below).

But for now, guys like Rotwein are glad that they still have a fishery -- and they will continue to work the system that is available to them.

Crab pots stacked on the back of the Sundown. In the background is the Humboldt shoreline since most small crab boats stay within a few miles of shore.



Now for the hard part

Let's assume you're a crab fisherman -- a very good one. You've just brought in 1,000 pounds of crab on your boat and you're looking to turn that crab into some cold hard cash. But who needs 1,000 pounds of fresh crab all at once?

Processors. Seafood processors buy the majority of crab during the most productive part of the season. That crab is then either sold live or -- more likely -- frozen and sold later in the year.

Processors naturally want to be paid for the trouble of taking care of all that extra crab. Crab that they buy for around \$2 a pound at the dock goes in grocery stores for around \$4.50, so there is a profit to be made.

Crab fishermen often see that profit and start crying foul, but the processors aren't necessarily their enemy, Rotwein said.

"In those years when we have a lot of crab, there's no other way we could deal with the volume," he said. The processors are necessary if crabbers want to continue to see years where a single boat trip can gross over \$10,000.

"If you catch 7,000 pounds, you won't complain about the \$1.65 price," he said.



*Left, measuring crabs to see if they are legal size.
Middle, emptying crab pots by artificial light. Pre-dawn starts are just part of successful crab fishing.
Right, Tossing the pot, emptied of crabs and loaded with fresh bait, back into the ocean.*

But a recent change in the marketplace for wholesale crab in Humboldt County has some crabbers worried. Eureka Fisheries, once the largest purchaser of crab from Eureka and Trinidad, was purchased and closed in August. That left only one big buyer for crab: Pacific Choice Seafood.

"It hurt when Eureka Fisheries went under," said Dave Bitts of the Humboldt Fisherman's Marketing Association. "Any time you have one player dominating the market, the pricing is going to get less competitive," he said. (Representatives of Pacific Choice were not available for comment.)

But the crab price isn't just a function of what Pacific Choice decides to do. "The market for crabs is national, if not international. The supply can come from anywhere between San Francisco and Alaska," Bitts said. Prices are a function of the crab supply along the whole Pacific Coast.

That's one reason this year has been so tough. While crabs are scarce here, prices remain low because of the large hauls crabbers are making in Oregon. "From Coos Bay north, we have the impression there is a fair abundance of crab," Bitts said.

Crab fishermen don't have to take low prices lying down. There are ways for some of the fresh crab they catch to be sold directly to the consumer. That's how Scott Creps is making ends meet this year. The part-time crabber, part-time logger owns the Barbara J out of the Woodley Island Marina. He's been selling live crabs directly from his boat under a new Eureka city program that started this year.

"We've been selling most of our crab down here at the dock," he said. "It's been real important."



Scott Creps sells live crab off his boat, the Barbara J, at the Woodley Island marina.

By cutting out the middleman, Creps is getting a lot more net cash out of the few crabs he's catching. "We're doubling our money here. Normally, we'd get



about \$1.75 a pound. Here, we get \$3.50." In a year when Creps is bringing in less than his normal load of crabs, the price premium is vital. Consumers get a deal too -- that's about \$1 less per pound than grocery stores charge.

Of course, one crabber has been selling directly to the consumer for years. Rotwein, also known as "Cap'n Zach," sells most of his crabs through his seafood restaurant and market in McKinleyville.

"I heard all these people complaining about the quality of the seafood around here," Rotwein said. He was pulling the stuff out of the ocean every day anyway, so he knew there was a good supply. The question was just getting that fresh fish to market and, "I saw a niche," he said.

It has helped cushion him from the swings of the crab industry. "Running the crab house isn't as exciting as catching the stuff, but in a bad year I have another job," he said.

A good financial strategy for the bad years like this one is a necessity in the crab game. Rotwein crabs because he loves it, saying it's "the most relaxing thing I can do." But in order to crab you have to possess more than love -- you need the tenacity and skill to navigate treacherous seas and a tough marketplace.

"What we have left are high-bred crabbers, the ones who are capable of surviving a couple bad years," he said. "The ones that will survive are the ones who are doing something right."

A new approach

WHEN FISHERMEN HEAR THE WORD REGULATION, THEY GET MEAN.

so -- regulations to protect species threatened by overfishing and habitat loss have all but closed most of the lucrative fisheries off the coast of Northern California. Salmon and rockfish are virtually off-limits to the vessels out of Eureka and Trinidad. That's left Dungeness crab as the only major commercial fishery, and fishermen don't want the government to get any ideas about additional regulations.

"We're real suspicious," said Zach Rotwein, a 20-year veteran of the crab industry. "We've seen what's happened to salmon and rockfish."



Humboldt State University fisheries biology Professor Dave Hankin at the crab lab. Hankin keeps dozens of crabs inside the HSU Telonicher Marine Laboratory in Trinidad.



But two Humboldt State University professors are trying to help crab fishermen make friends with regulation. By changing the rules under which crabbers operate, there is a chance they could make more money -- a lot more.

"The way that Dungeness crab are managed now in the regulatory scheme results in a fishing derby," and that's bad for the fishermen, said Steve Hackett, professor of economics at HSU.

Most of a season's legal-size crab are landed in a month-long frenzy at the beginning, leading to a glut on the marketplace. More crab is caught than can be sold fresh, so processors buy the excess, freeze it, and sell it through the year. Crab is much less expensive frozen than fresh, so the fisherman gets less money per pound.

But what if the crab catch was spread out across the entire season, which lasts six and a half months? The crabbers could sell all their crab on the fresh fish marketplace for an added price. "It would probably improve the lot of fishermen," Hackett said.

The idea has been tried before with remarkable success in other fisheries, said Dave Hankin, HSU fisheries biology professor and Hackett's research partner.

The fishery for Pacific halibut used to be an absolute free-for-all, Hankin said. "The fishery was regulated through quotas -- there was only so much fishermen could catch in a given area."

That made fishing for halibut a race. Once the quota had been reached, everyone had to stop, but until that point, fishermen could try as hard as they wanted. Those that set out lots and lots of fishing gear would get a greater portion of the quota, so boats got caught in a kind of arms race, always trying to outdo each other. The end result? "The quota would be caught in a matter of days," Hankin said.

That sent most of the halibut to the freezer, and fishermen got low prices for their frenzied effort.

Until a new regulatory system came along, that is. A new quota system was established, where each boat was allowed a certain portion of the total catch. They could go out to harvest that catch whenever they wanted -- when the price was high. The result was "a two- to three-fold increase in the income that fishery produces, with no extra biological impact," Hankin said.

That's what Hackett and Hankin want to talk to crab fishermen about: Could it work here? While the crab fishery lacks the regulatory framework of quotas that existed for halibut, Hackett and Hankin think it is worth talking about. The most important thing for them right now, Hankin said, is not to give the wrong impression.

"You have to expect fishermen to be pretty reluctant to allow any more regulation, because all the other regulations in other fisheries have been pretty disastrous." And the seafood processors have built up the capacity to handle large amounts of crab; Hackett and Hankin both said they don't want to do anything to ruin that investment.

"Any ideas about regulation would have to come from the participants themselves," Hackett said.

Above all, Hankin wants to make it clear to fishermen that no one is trying to curtail the amount of crab they catch; they're just looking for a more economically efficient way. He thinks crabbers will listen because it would be in their best interest.

"I'm willing to bet there are substantial numbers of fishermen out there right now who realize that what's going on now is not a good thing."

But it may be an uphill road. As Rotwein said, the crabbers "are managing right now, even if it isn't a pretty picture." That's more than you can say for the salmon fishery.

"If they're asking me to trust the government, I would have to say I'd rather stay with the status quo," he said.

Hackett and Hankin invite all interested parties -- especially crabbers -- to discuss the idea at a meeting March 27 at the conference room in the Woodley Island Marina complex.

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