

Scientists worry about Dungeness crab fishery

Leigh Cooper 6:02 p.m. PST November 13, 2014



(Photo: Kerry Klein)

The commercial Dungeness crab season begins Saturday, and, for the first time, Dungeness crabs open with a Good Alternative ranking from Monterey Bay Aquarium's Seafood Watch after being downgraded from Best Choice.

The reason for the switch reflects the fact that a stock assessment, which records the number, age and sex of the crabs, is needed for Dungeness in the United States, said Seafood Watch in a report on the crustaceans. A count would help assess the sustainability of the Dungeness fishery. The Seafood Watch report said the switch does not mean the fishery has recently changed.

Dungeness populations traditionally rise and fall in seven- to 10-year cycles, but recent hauls have exceeded historic yields. Along the Central Coast crab crops averaged more than 13 million pounds over the last four years, according to the California Department of Fish and Wildlife. Harvests averaged almost 4 million pounds per season for the 10 previous years.

Scientists don't know why the population has recently exploded, but they worry it won't last. Christy Juhasz, a scientist with the California Department of Fish and Wildlife, suggested that unidentified sea conditions, such as high temperatures, may be driving the especially high Dungeness numbers, but at this point it is only a guess.

Researchers say they are struggling to fund investigations on Dungeness population cycles.

"We rely on public money to pay for our science," said Zeke Grader, executive director of the Institute for Fisheries Resources. "It gets very frustrating when you have legislators that won't raise taxes to fund the science."

Juhasz and Grader both said that, on top of basic Dungeness research, studies on the effects of climate change and ocean acidification on the crabs would be welcomed.

"We're not in a crisis right now, but we want to make sure we don't get into a crisis," Grader said.

Seafood Watch also raised concerns about the effect the fishery has on endangered humpback whales. From California through British Columbia, humpbacks come in contact with the crabbing industry, and although it's a rare occurrence, whales have become entangled in pot fishing gear.

But crab lovers shouldn't lose heart. Despite the knowledge gaps, "Seafood Watch still recommends that consumers and businesses can buy Dungeness crab," said a Seafood Watch representative in an email response.

In the hopes of maintaining a sustainable population for future seasons, Fish and Wildlife limits the season, sex, number and size of crabs kept by crabbers. Crabbers can only keep large males and must release females. To protect young crabs, crabbers outfit traps with escape rings — baseball-sized holes — for undersized crabs to use as getaway routes.

Last year's controversial "limited entry permit" system also fixed the number of crabbing permits available to crabbers and limited the number of traps each vessel could set.

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