

Boaters beware -- loose crab traps can cause havoc and headaches, UF expert says

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With thousands of boats expected on Florida's waterways this Memorial Day weekend, University of Florida extension agents say sailors should be wary of lost or abandoned crab traps that can wreak havoc on propellers and engines. But they warn that removing traps from the water could leave boaters on the wrong side of the law.

"It's kind of a bizarre situation," said Betty Staugler, a Charlotte County-based marine extension agent with UF's Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences.

Because poaching has such a detrimental effect on crabbers' livelihood, penalties are steep. It's a third-degree felony to tamper with a trap that doesn't belong to you – even if it's obviously been abandoned or so storm-battered as to be useless, she said.

Besides the criminal penalties, anyone who tampers with a trap can be fined \$5,000 and permanently lose all saltwater fishing privileges, said Juli Dodson of the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission.

During a recent cleanup on the Peace River in Charlotte County, volunteers reeled in 161 abandoned crab traps, said Staugler, also a specialist with Florida Sea Grant, a state and federal effort to create a sustainable coastal economy and environment.

But the search covered just a three-mile span of the river and there is danger to boaters wherever blue crab fishermen are active – which is just

about anywhere in the state where salt water meets fresh, she said.

Cleanups like the April 10 half-day event Staugler organized weren't even allowed before 2003, she said. To stage such a cleanup, it takes state approval and a written plan that covers everything from precisely where the cleanup will take place to who'll be involved.

Staugler said she doesn't believe many crabbers purposely abandon traps, but the few who do cause a lot of headaches.

Capt. Ralph Allen, who operates King Fisher Fleet in Punta Gorda, said his fishing expedition and tour boats run into abandoned traps most frequently during the winter when crabbers are less active.

But for less experienced boaters – including some who will take to the water this weekend – the trap's buoy and rope can be hard to spot, especially if they've been in the water for a long time.

“After being in the water a few months, they can be surprisingly hard to pick up,” he said.

The traps are square, about 2 feet long and generally have chicken-wire mesh on the sides and a rebar bottom. A line runs from the trap to a white or colored buoy. Storms, boaters or currents can knock the buoys loose, leaving traps nearly impossible to detect.

Allen, whose company runs river tours and fishing trips, said his boats tangle with abandoned traps and loose lines about 10 times a year. When that happens, he's forced to call in a diver to clear the line from the boat's propeller.

“Starting in about November, I shake my fist a lot and grit my teeth,” he said.

Boaters who hit a trap or tangle in loose lines may untangle the line, but must leave the trap where they found it, Staugler said.

Unattended traps can attract wildlife that can swim or crawl inside and starve, Staugler said. Some cleanup volunteers around the state have found everything from diamondback terrapins to grouper to catfish stuck in abandoned traps.

In recent years, state environmental officials have debated whether to pay for volunteer-based cleanups, or whether there should be a short shutdown of blue crab season, during which fishermen would account for their traps and any unclaimed traps could be removed.

Early numbers from the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission show that in 2005, Florida crabbers hauled in more than 11 million pounds of hard- and soft-shell blue crab, earning them about \$11.4 million.

Source: University of Florida

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