

Fishermen clean ocean of lost crabbing gear

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Kevin Pinto, a commercial crab fisherman based in Eureka and a member of the Humboldt Fishermen's Marketing Association, pulls in a lost crab pot during a gear recovery effort. Credit: Justin Cox/UC Davis photo

California's rugged North Coast lays claim to one of the state's most valuable commercial fisheries: Dungeness crab. Millions of pounds of this meaty delicacy are pulled in each year from Morro Bay to the

California-Oregon border, making for an industry valued at \$32 million to \$95 million per year.

But there's another catch: Many of the thousands of crab pots set in the sea don't make their way back.

Now, a group of [fishermen](#) collaborating with the University of California, Davis, are working to remove the lost crabbing gear from the ocean and sell it back to the original owners under what they hope will be an economically sustainable model for future cleanups.

"The most exciting thing about this project is that the fishermen themselves are taking the lead," said Kirsten Gilardi, director of the California Lost Fishing Gear Recovery Project, a program of the SeaDoc Society, which is part of the Karen C. Drayer Wildlife Health Center at the UC Davis School of Veterinary Medicine. "They are mobilizing the fishermen to participate, conducting all the transactions of funds and gear, and even realizing financial benefits for their hard work to clean the ocean."

The UC Davis researchers have teamed up with the Humboldt Fishermen's Marketing Association and commercial crab fishermen in neighboring Del Norte County. Since late July, they have collected 556 derelict crab pots.

The fishermen are participating in the recovery effort in the off-season. They have concentrated on the waters off Eureka, Trinidad and Crescent City—the state's top crab-producing region, hauling in more than 16 million pounds of Dungeness in 2013.

The peak of the Dungeness crab season, December through February, comes when the Pacific Ocean is prone to massive winter swells, rollicking waves, and energetic rains and wind. Small wonder crab pots

are commonly lost at sea.

The lost pots' long buoy lines pose an entanglement hazard to other boats, fisheries and wildlife, including whales. The fishermen want to create a truly sustainable fishery, free from these hazards. They are also concerned that prime crabbing grounds are becoming littered with lost and abandoned gear.

"Everybody knows there's gear around," said Kevin Pinto, a commercial crab fisherman in Eureka and captain of fishing vessel Seaila. "Now we're working pretty hard to try to keep it cleaned up."

The California Lost Fishing Gear Recovery Project has been operating since 2005, mostly in Southern California, where they contracted with sea urchin divers to recover [fishing gear](#). However, ocean conditions on the North Coast aren't typically conducive to divers. Further, the pots are often lodged deep in the sand and mud and irrecoverable without specialized pumping equipment.

In Humboldt and Del Norte counties, the scientists and fishermen created an alternative solution to contract divers. Part of a grant to UC Davis from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation's Fishing for Energy program, subawarded to HFMA, reimburses fishermen for fuel expenses to retrieve the crab pots using boats equipped with pumping gear. Jennifer Renzullo, Eureka-based field manager for the California Lost Fishing Gear Recovery Project, rides along and records the exact location of the recovered gear, its condition and the number of pots collected.

Each pot has an identifiable tag tracing it to the owner. The pot is either sold back to the original owner for \$50-\$75 (a new pot costs between \$160-\$200), or recycled. The money collected is set aside to fund future years' recovery efforts.

"What's great is the fishermen are talking about how we can make this sustainable to continue this program in the future," Renzullo said.

In the meantime, the local response has been positive. Shortly after the first cleanup off the Trinidad coast, a fisherman who had helped in the effort was sport fishing in the area for salmon. Over his VHF radio, he heard fishermen talking to each other about how their gear had been getting hung up in other fishing areas but that the waters off Trinidad were so clear.

"He called me up really excited," Renzullo said. "It was a great feeling."

Provided by UC Davis

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