**Crab Season Evolution**

**A Look at How Big Change Is Here To Stay**

**Subject of Controversy**

CDFW (California Dpt of Fish & Wildlife) is the state regulators that monitor and control fishing regulations to protect all wildlife in the effort to sustain species and protect against extinction. At the heart of controversy is the beloved whale population that travels close to our shoreline in their migration and are getting entangled in crab gear.

**Statistics on Entanglements**

Studies have shown up to 200 entanglements happen every year with only approx 10% of those confirmed or reported. 100% of entanglements happen because of humans and majority are from commercial crabbing gear. A commercial crab pot is significantly larger and heavier that the recreational crab pot and can weigh over 100 pounds with rope reaching lengths of 300+ feet per pot. In 2013 it was reported that there were 400,000 permitted pots allowed along the west coast not accounting for unreported users. Of that it’s estimated that 10% of those pots are lost every year. With all that said, CDFW has been using it’s data to figure out how to reduce entanglements to lessen the impact on whale deaths caused by crab gear.

**Crab Pot Verse Hoop Net**

A crab pot is an enclosed cage typically round or square in shape that can sit at the bottom of the ocean for up to 7 days before it must be pulled up by the owner. A hoop net is an open ended enclosure that is only allowed to remain in the water for a max of 2 hours before being required to be pulled up. Both devices have a rope that attaches to it and a floatation device at the surface of the water that allows the owner to identify it’s their device and to be able to retrieve it. The method of crabbing can take place from shallow to very deep water. For pots to remain in the water for extended time, they are typically weighed down to resist moving and being lost. This term is called “Walking”. The deeper the water fished in, the easier it is to lose your gear with there being more energy in the water current. The same is true with longer soak time where conditions can change and cause walking. When weather is bad, boats will not go out to retrieve their pots and can end up losing the gear during rough weather.

**New Way of Life**

Last year the crab industry was caught off guard with CDFW right before the season opened, decided to ban crab pots for the first part of the season and force the use of hoop nets for sport fishing charters to try and convert to if they wanted to do business. That lasted for months if I recall before pots were allowed again. This was based on CDFW claiming a drop in whale sighting reports. Many of us sport fishing/crabbers, feel there is no going back. It’s logical that reducing pots soaking in the water reduces entanglements and by enforcing hoop nets where 2 hour soak is max, of course there will be a reduction in entanglements. As the statistics over time prove the benefits of this change, it’s expected that hoops will extend longer into the crab season and who knows maybe pots become extinct.

This is only the second year we are encountering this new change and there has already been a press release in CDFW announcing some more regs related to the hoop nets all but confirming another season opener with pots banned and hoop nets enforced.

**How Does This Impact Combo Trips?**

Previous to hoop nets, charters would have lines of crab pots always soaking in the water, so it was almost guaranteed process for them retrieving limits of crab for the customers in a short and quick pull of a few pots and the rest of the day would be dedicated to fishing, thus making it a limit of crab and rock fish in one trip. Without pots soaking and having at will crab to load up on, hoop nets on the contrary have to be deployed and retrieved within 2 hours with the unknown of whether crabs will be plentiful or not. The hoop net process heavily cuts into the travel time to fishing grounds and time to actually fish, so my personal opinion is that early season combos won’t be productive until pots are back into full swing. Everything is speculative and will only be understood once the charter reports roll in after the season starts. Here we are less than a month away from opener and have not heard anything definitive from CDFW, so another nail biter for the charter biz and private boaters in general. Same impact across all levels of the crabbing biz.

**Summary**

This article was to help our club members interested in crabbing and specifically the combo trips understand what new changes are impacting the fishing/crab combo trips coming up. These have always been a heavily anticipated and popular trip that book up early with everyone wanting to load up on crab and fish. Now with such high costs that have remained from the COVID era, costs in combo with reg changes are hitting the bottom line.