So They Built A Better Trap--for Lobsters

The lobster fishery has experienced radical changes in the past decade, but one factor has remained constant: the fisherman's search for a trap that will "fish" better than any other. A trap fishes well when it attracts and holds as many lobsters as it possibly can. First, the lobster samples the bait in trap's kitchen. Then it moves leisurely into the "parlor," the trap's storage section. It is assumed in the fishery that the lobster cannot make its way out.

From its beginnings over 200 years ago, to the early 1960s, New England commercial lobstering remained unchanged. Generally, the lone lobsterman went to sea in his small boat. Each morning, in water close to shore, he set wooden pots in 6 to 120 feet of water; at night, he hauled them--hoping to see $\frac{1}{2}$ to $2\frac{1}{2}$ pounds in each trap.

Offshore Lobsters

The inshore supply of lobsters kept falling behind, and the lobsterman went farther looking for more. He found a large popula- 100 to 250 miles offshore, down to 2,000 feet. Lobstering became a new venture: large boats, 7-8-man crews, expensive equipment. The lobsterman tried trawling at first, but it did not work. Lobsters often were damaged, and the trawling gear was damaged on rough bottoms.

NMFS Research

NMFS undertook to produce a practical trap for the offshore fishery. First, its researchers tried steel. Most inshore lobstermen already had replaced their traps' wooden slats with polyvinyl-coated wire mesh because it resisted water less and therefore lasted longer. This concept was carried over to an all-metal polyvinyl or aluminum-coated trap. This was heavier and less buoyant in deep water, and much lighter and easier to handle out of water; it weighs about half the water-logged wooden pot.

Price was the problem. Big traps were designed first--up to 138 pounds costing $100 each. This was too much for the average offshore lobsterman fishing over 500 pots. Also, many lobstermen believed that metal did not fish as well as wood; to them, wood takes on an attractive mossy exterior and fishy smell.

As design was modified and price lowered considerably, all-metal traps won over some fishermen. The 48 x 28 x 18 inch size is popular. It costs about $24; a wood-framed trap, same size and design, costs around $18. When a lobsterman handles hundreds of pots, the $6 difference becomes great.

The Double-Parlor Model

The 48 x 28 x 18 inch size, called the double-parlor model, is the best-selling offshore trap of several New England manufacturers. It represents a major change from two other pots: the standard inshore trap, with one parlor, and the unsuccessful large-size pots developed for offshore fishing. The double-parlor trap, supporters say, has 2 advantages: it offers more holding space for lobsters (important when traps are hauled only every 4-5 days), and it offers the lobster two exits from the kitchen--and so eases the congestion around the bait there. Fishermen generally are pleased with this model.

Which Material for Ideal Trap?

No material is ideal for the lobster pot, according to the New England Marine Resources Information Program. Besides considering which material fishes best, the lobsterman has to consider price, weight, and durability. Neither wood, steel, nor plastic meets all requirements.

Shipworms

Many fishermen believe that wood-framed traps catch 25-30% more lobster than all-metal traps. However, wood is susceptible to attack by shipworms when not dried periodically, as are inshore traps. After 4 or 5 months, it is not uncommon for a fisherman to lose a third or more of his traps to shipworms.

Many fishermen doubt the value of dips that are applied to wooden traps and are supposed to keep shipworms--but not lobsters--away.

It is safe to say that fishermen will continue to debate the economics and longevity of wood vs. metal traps for many a lobster season.