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Oil spill no threat to this lobster miniseason

It's a wait-and-see approach how oil could impact future seasons

By Steve Waters, Sun Sentinel

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When lobster miniseason opens at 12:01 a.m. Wednesday, there's no fear the tasty crustaceans snagged by divers off South Florida will be tainted from the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico.

"It won't affect us," said Tony Coulter of the Diversity dive boat, whose miniseason trips out of Boca Inlet Wednesday and Thursday morning are sold out.

"My people, they're very excited about it."

The two-day miniseason is popular with recreational divers because it gives them the first crack at catching spiny lobsters since the regular season closed on March 31. The regular season, during which commercial and recreational harvest is allowed, opens Aug. 6.

And while scientists say the oil spill might possibly affect the lobster population longer-term, it's not something divers are worried about for this season.

"That's a non-factor at this point," said Jeff Torode, the president of South Florida Diving Headquarters in Pompano Beach, who has at least two miniseason trips a day planned for two of his three boats.

There have been calls from out-of-town divers wondering if the oil spill would affect miniseason, but as Coulter said, "We tell them there's no oil here. Some callers were going to dive in the Gulf and now they're coming here."

For most of the estimated 30,000 divers that will be hunting lobsters this week, the miniseason is an annual ritual. Even factoring in the cost of gas, equipment and time off from work, it's an event some wouldn't dream of missing.

"I love it," said Clint Bridges of Plantation, who always goes diving during miniseason, yet hardly ever goes during the regular season.

Although it's usually cheaper to buy lobsters when the regular season opens as opposed to diving for them during the miniseason, Bridges enjoys the thrill of catching his own dinner. He added that he and his friends have some spots off Miami Beach where they routinely get their 12-lobster-per-person

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miniseason limit, which is twice the regular-season limit.

Bridges and his buddies plan to dive there Wednesday and Thursday. He said not going because of the oil spill was never a consideration.

"I was thinking that it wouldn't even affect us on this coast," Bridges said. "Everything that I've been hearing is it's going to affect the Gulf."

Chad Carney of SCUBAdventures said the Naples dive shop has been busy selling lobster gear such as loopers and catch bags to its customers.

"Miniseason is still a big thing," he said. "Everybody buys this stuff and goes down to the Keys and the East coast."

That's not because of oil. It's because the lobstering in the Gulf just isn't that good.

Carney, a dive instructor who specializes in spearfishing and maintains the floridaskindiver.com web site, said his best day in 30-plus years of diving in the Gulf was 17 lobsters back when the regular-season limit was 24 per boat.

"Of course people have been asking about the oil spill and we've been trying to shed the truth on things and let them know there's been nothing here," Carney said. "Southwest Florida is probably the safest place in the state, even if they can't shut [the well] off, based on the currents."

Where those currents eventually carry the oil in the Gulf could affect future lobster seasons. Lobster eggs drift with the current. The Keys and South Florida get their lobsters from areas such as the Dry Tortugas, west of Key West, and the Caribbean. Eggs from lobsters in South Florida replenish stocks along the Atlantic coast.

"I've caught spiny lobsters in North Carolina and, believe it or not, I've had friends catch them in Ireland, where the Gulf Stream ends," Coulter said.

How oil could hurt future seasons

If the oil were to reach the places in the Gulf where baby lobsters begin their lives, a year's worth of lobsters could be lost, which might not be apparent for several years.

"Crustaceans are sensitive, especially in the juvenile and larval stages," said Dr. Richard Dodge, dean of the Nova Southeastern University Oceanographic Center and an expert on corals and coral reefs.

"There's a possibility that oil could affect South Florida's source of lobsters. If the oil reaches there and is not floating and has toxic elements, it affects baby lobsters."

If oil were to blanket the reefs in South Florida, that would affect adult lobsters, but the odds of that happening are remote. If an oily sheen on the water's surface or tar balls appear in South Florida, the reefs and lobsters will be fine.

"Typically, if oil is floating, it's going to float over the reef, so it's relatively benign," Dodge said.

"Depending on the degree the oil mixes into the water column, then it's more dangerous."

Not knowing where the submerged oil is what concerns Dodge.

"There's kind of two sources of the oil: the floating oil that's going to weather quickly and then the submerged oil. We have no sense of where [the submerged oil] is and that's what I worry about the most. If it sneaks up on us, it's going to be in the water column and touch the reef and touch the things that live in the reef," Dodge said.

Bill Cole of Sea Experience, a Fort Lauderdale dive shop and dive boat, said he feared the worst when the BP/Deepwater Horizon oil rig exploded on April 20.

Reports of the oil coming to the Keys and South Florida were rampant. On May 3, University of Miami physical oceanographer Nick Shay was quoted by numerous publications and online sites as saying that the oil would likely get into the Gulf loop current and, within a week, be in the Keys and then get into the Gulf Stream. That never happened.

"I worried about that so much when it started, I couldn't sleep at night," said Cole, who relaxed as the oil stayed away from South Florida. "But even before they capped this thing, I wasn't worried about it.

"To be honest with you, I can't even imagine [oil-covered South Florida reefs] happening with what's going on right now. If the worst case happens, then I don't think we'd even notice it out on the reef. There'd be small, weathered tar balls on the beach and people would have to clean them off their feet."

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