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The Last of the Lobstermen, Chasing a Vanishing Treasure



Barton Silverman/The New York Times

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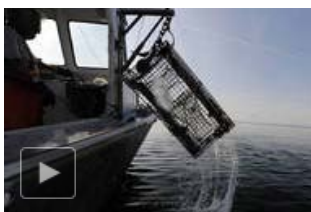
By BARTON SILVERMAN and MICHAEL WILSON
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No matter his age, a Long Island lobsterman, thinking back to the good old days, will always describe the same years. That would be pretty much any of them before 1999.

It has been 12 years since a great die-off of lobsters in Long Island Sound [rocked the local industry](#) and [stumped researchers](#). It lasted three days but wiped out an estimated nine-tenths of the catch, compared with two years earlier.

Scientists [blamed global warming](#), citing increased temperatures in the lower waters where lobsters live. Another culprit was pesticides like those deployed against the West Nile virus. The die-off began around the same time that the remnants of Hurricane Floyd swept over Long Island and, lobstermen believe, flushed pesticides into the Sound.

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"Less than a half a pound a pot," Mr. Karlin said of the lobster take these days. "During the spring this year, it wasn't even that."

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Mr. Karlin's lobster catch.

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Phil Karlin, perhaps alone among the lobstermen, expressed a tone of optimism: "Time will tell, you know. Right now, there are some small lobsters around. If everything goes right, they could bounce back."

The past 12 years have not been kind. Adding to the misery is a bacterial invasion that causes deformities in lobster shells and "reduces the marketability of the product," said Antoinette Clemetson, a marine fisheries specialist with New York Sea Grant. "We're in the worst possible environmental combination of factors. They're simultaneous."

For the last of the lobstermen, the difference lies — or more likely, does not lie — in the pot at the end of the rope they drag up from the water.

First, the good old days: "A pound to two pounds a pot," said Phil Karlin, 70, a commercial fisherman for about 45 years. "Or two-pounds-plus even. Keepers. We would haul, on the average, 300 or 400 pots a day."

Today's take is a fraction of that. "Less than a half a pound a pot," Mr. Karlin said. "During the spring this year, it wasn't even that. Most of the fellows have given up on it for the year. Two-and-a-half pounds of lobsters in five pots — that would be real good right now."

Mr. Karlin showed prescience years ago when, spooked by a bad season in the 1970s, he branched out. "I drag for fish," he said. "Conch. I'm pretty diversified."

Likewise, Peter Ringen, 71, with decades of experience in the Sound, has turned to \$2-a-pound conch over futile hunts for lobsters. He has about 900 lobster traps. "I'm not even looking at them anymore," he said. "I'm bringing them home."

Not so for Robert Darling, who started lobstering when he was 12. He is now 70. He takes a mate out into the Sound every morning at 5 and hauls in about 40 or 50 lobsters, he said, down from 400 pounds years ago. He sells them right off the dock. "Doesn't take long at all," he said.

People love a lobster in the summer.

He jokes with the crew. "I tell them they should be paying me for the exercise, instead of lobstering," he said. For him, it is a side job: "I'm making a living by working in a boatyard."

Retirement age? "Six feet under," he said. "My father was a lobsterman before me. My grandfather worked the bay, too. My son? That's not going to happen. It's going to end."

Mr. Karlin expressed a lone note of optimism: "Time will tell, you know. Right now, there are some small lobsters around. If everything goes right, they could bounce back. We're pretty optimistic in this business."

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