

Shelling out for science

Study tracks lobsters using devices
glued to their backs

By [BRIAN MEDEL](#) / Yarmouth Bureau

YARMOUTH - Lobsters with
backpacks?

You're not seeing things.

Lobsters in the Gulf of St. Lawrence and
the Northumberland Strait are helping
scientists track their movements by
wearing tiny packs.

They don't come cheap - about \$350 per pack - and they don't come off,
either. The packs are glued to their backs by fishery biologists.

The tale began last July with the launch of a two-year study, says Marc
Lanteigne, a senior biologist with the Department of Fisheries and Oceans
in Moncton.

He took part in lobster workshops Thursday in Yarmouth and told
fishermen this lobster-tagging project is superior to any previous scientific
snooping session.

"These backpacks are a little tube about one inch long and maybe a
quarter of an inch in diameter, and they have an acoustic transmission
device inside," Mr. Lanteigne said.

"It's a hard plastic tube with a serial number on top. They're glued with
epoxy. Right now we have about 35 of these tags in the water."

DFO has also placed a bunch of underwater listening posts around the
region - a sort of underwater Cold War.

These "passive receptors," as Mr. Lanteigne calls them, track lobsters as
they crawl by. (They'd better, at about \$1,000 a pop.)

"There are 50 acoustic receptors that we've set on the bottom of the sea at
different locations," he said.



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A pair of lobsters wear devices
designed to track their
movements.

"So when a lobster passes by these receptors (they'll) record the serial number, the date and the time.

"Next (July) I will remove these receptors and download the information to a computer. We'll see where these lobsters have been over a year," he said.

All manner of lobsters qualify for the study - males and females with or without eggs.

There's just one requirement of crustacean candidates, Mr. Lanteigne said.

"We have to select lobsters that just moulted," he said. "We have to take lobsters that we know will stay with the same shell for at least a year."

The lobster fishery runs from August through October in the study region, and some of the pack-toting critters caught the eye of fishermen.

"It's quite amazing the number of people who caught these lobsters with backpacks (and) called us, after recording the position and the serial number and throwing back these lobster into the water," Mr. Lanteigne said.

When scientists tagged lobsters the old-fashioned way - affixing numbered plastic strips to their backs - they never knew quite where the lobsters travelled. The only way they would get one returned was in a catch the next season.

"We know the lobster will go into a deeper area in the winter and come close to shore in the summer," Mr. Lanteigne said.

The Northumberland Strait is quite shallow and includes different management areas, he said, so it's "important to know where the lobsters are coming from."

The backpack study will help scientists understand how one lobster-holding area affects a neighbouring one.

Fishery managers may then be able to better maintain areas known to be lobster nurseries rich in nutrients.

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