

Derelict Blue Crab Traps: Louisiana's Ghostly Problem

In Louisiana's coastal ecosystem, ghosts lurk just below the water's surface. Blue crab traps that have been abandoned or otherwise lost continue to capture crabs and other marine species. Through a process known as "ghost-fishing," these derelict traps contribute to the mortality of many recreational, commercial, and conservation species of importance. Each trap that becomes derelict removes nearly 26 blue crabs from the fishery each year. Considering that tens of thousands of traps may become derelict each year, the impact to the fishery is considerable.



The problem of derelict fishing gear and associated marine debris is a global concern. In 2004, the Louisiana State Legislature recognized the problem in our state and gave the authority to the Louisiana Wildlife and Fisheries Commission to set annual closures of the blue crab fishery under R.S. 56:332 (N). The closure period is set in designated areas during a 16 consecutive day period between February 1 and March 31. These closures are designed to have minimal impact on the blue crab fishery when blue crab catch is the lowest and increase the efforts to remove derelict blue crab traps. A small fee is collected from each trap license issued, which helps fund the removal efforts. Since the start of the program, more than 20,000 derelict traps have been removed from Louisiana waters. The success of the removal programs depends on the active awareness by all user groups.



Where do these traps come from?

All water-based user groups contribute to derelict crab traps. Derelict traps may originate from: accidental loss of actively fished traps due to tides, currents or storm surges; weathering of buoys or lines; clipping of buoy lines by vessel propellers; displacement of traps caught in shrimp gear; intentional cutting of buoy lines by vandals; and improper disposal of old traps.

Are all derelict crab traps illegal?

No. Some accidental loss is inevitable. Only derelict traps that are intentionally, improperly discarded are illegal.

Do derelict traps only affect animals?

Derelict traps may also result in user group conflicts with other individuals who share waterways for other types of fishing and recreation. Shrimpers can snag derelict traps in their trawls, which can hinder harvest operations and cause economic loss to the industry. Additionally, derelict traps pose navigational hazards to boaters and may result in loss of property or harm to watercraft passengers and crew. Recreational anglers can snag tackle on unmarked traps and lose fishing line and gear, continuing the marine debris problem. Plus, shorelines and marshes that are littered with old, abandoned traps are esthetically displeasing to visitors along our coast.

If I see a derelict trap or snag it on my boat or fishing tackle, can I keep it?

No. Only the owner of the crab trap may remove it. However, the Louisiana Wildlife and Fisheries Commission approves an annual closure of the blue crab fishery for 16 days during the winter in designated areas. During this time and within the designated closure areas, anyone can remove a derelict crab trap.

What can be done about this problem?

Following trap loss prevention tips will help decrease the number of traps that become derelict each year. Also, volunteers can participate in the Annual Derelict Crab Trap Rodeos that are held during the Commission-approved fishery closures.



Tips for Preventing derelict crab traps:

1. Don't intentionally cut buoy lines.
2. Always check lines, knots, and buoys for proper function.
3. Avoid setting traps in navigational areas.
4. Make sure traps haven't drifted into areas of high traffic.
5. Properly discard unfishable traps.
6. Attach a common float if you accidentally sever someone else's buoy line.
7. Remove traps before predicted major weather events.
8. If possible, use easily degradable cull rings or hog rings to prevent ghost fishing.
9. Secure traps to boat while navigating.
10. Report derelict traps.



For more information about marine debris, derelict crab traps, and opportunities to participate in annual derelict crab trap removal programs visit:

www.laseagrant.org/crabtraps