

About Derelict Blue Crab Traps

Despite the importance of the blue crab fishery to coastal communities, derelict blue crab traps are a growing problem not only in Florida's coastal waters, but around the Gulf of Mexico. According to the Gulf States Marine Fisheries Commission, over 58,000 derelict traps have been removed from Gulf coastal waters since 2002. Each of the five Gulf states now has removal programs in place to help minimize the impact caused by derelict traps.



What are the legal definitions of a derelict crab trap?

According to the state of Florida, a derelict trap is:

- 1) Any trap present during the closed season for that species
- 2) A fishable trap in the open fishing season that lacks more than two of the following items: buoy, buoy line, current FWC-issued trap tag (commercial) or identification (recreational), and current license.

The state of Florida has specific legal definitions of what constitutes a derelict trap in order to protect personal property. (Image: GSMFC)

Who can remove derelict crab traps?

It is important to remember that crab traps are protected by law. It is a third degree felony to tamper with someone else's traps (or their content), lines, or buoys. Only individuals participating in an organized trap removal program and who have an authorized permit from the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) may handle and remove derelict traps even if it is apparent the traps are not being actively fished. To learn more about how to organize a derelict crab trap event and the permit application process visit:

http://www.flseagrant.org/program_areas/fisheries/trap_removal/index.html.



Sea Grant Agent Betty Staugler helps remove trap debris during a permitted clean up event she organized with commercial crabbers and local agencies along the Peace River in Charlotte County. (Image: FSG)

Why are derelict crab traps a problem?



Derelict traps can have several negative environmental and economic impacts. One of the more prominent environmental impacts is "**ghost fishing**" or fishing that continues despite the traps not being actively fished. These events can result in high mortality rates of trapped crabs and lost revenue for fishermen.

"Ghost fishing" or fishing that continues even after a trap has been lost can trap and/or kill several important commercial and recreationally important fish and invertebrate species. (Image GSMFC)

However, ghost fishing does not only affect crabs. Studies have shown at least 23 species of fish, including several recreationally important species such as a red and black drum, sea trout, and southern flounder as well as several invertebrate species are caught in crab traps. Drowning in derelict crab traps has also been shown to be a major threat to diamondback terrapin populations. Buoy lines or trap wire can serve as a hazard to dolphins, manatees, sea turtles and other sea life through entanglement.



Fish such as these croakers are just one type of fish commonly caught in derelict crab traps (Image: NOAA)

Crab traps are made of vinyl-coated wire mesh that can have a life expectancy of several years depending on the surrounding conditions and thickness of wire gauge used. The traps will continue ghost fishing until they break down enough for bycatch to escape. Another issue is traps are effective at capturing crabs, but not as efficient in respect to the size of crabs it catches. As a result, traps can retain excess numbers of sublegal crabs which can result in higher mortality levels if they are not able to escape. However, traps in Florida are required to have escape rings for undersized crabs, which have been shown to significantly reduce retention of these undersized crabs. Location of traps also plays a factor in ghost fishing rates. Most crab traps are placed in estuarine waters near productive habitats such as seagrasses, oyster beds, and mangroves which harbor a high diversity of species. Ghost fishing is more likely to occur in these areas than in more barren areas when left for long periods of time.



Derelict traps are unsightly and serve as a navigation hazard to both commercial and recreational vessels (Image: FSG)

Derelict traps are also unsightly, can negatively impact sensitive bottom habitats such as seagrasses or natural hardbottom environments, and are navigation hazards to both commercial and recreational vessels. Traps and buoy lines can damage propeller shafts and fishing gear resulting in costly repairs, and lost fishing opportunities. Derelict traps may also escalate conflicts between different user groups such as crabbers and shrimpers or recreational fishermen due to the damage they can incur.

How do traps become derelict?

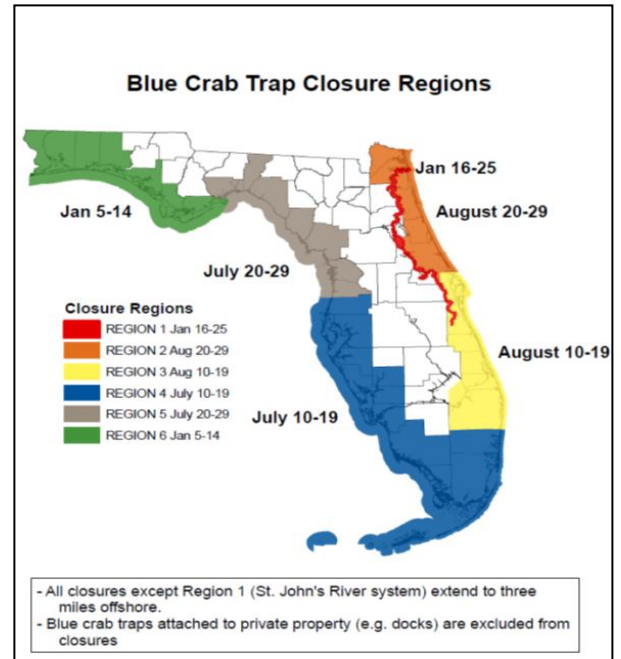
There are numerous reasons why traps may become derelict. Often hundreds of commercial traps are deployed at a time and the gear is left unattended. Visitors and seasonal residents may also put out traps during their stay, but forget to pull them before they leave. As a result, the gear is more prone to loss and abandonment. Traps may be displaced by storms, tides, and currents, struck by boat propellers or vandalized. In addition traps may be inappropriately disposed of or intentionally abandoned by both commercial and recreational crabbers.

2009 Blue Crab Trap Closures

To help facilitate efforts to identify and retrieve lost and abandoned blue crab traps in state waters FWC is requiring regional closed seasons for the blue crab fishery beginning in July of 2009. The regional closures will last for 10 days, extend out to three miles offshore and apply to both commercial and recreational free standing traps (*blue crab traps attached to private property (i.e. docks) are excluded from the closure*). All commercial and recreational traps left in state waters during the ten day closure will be considered derelict. Remember, you must be a part of an organized trap clean up event with an active permit to remove the traps.

How can you help?

Report derelict traps and/or illegal tampering of crab traps any time to FWC Law Enforcement at 1-888-404-FWCC (3922). Please provide the location (*GPS coordinates if possible*) and condition of the trap to authorities. To learn more about derelict crab traps issues around the Gulf of Mexico visit: <http://www.gsmfc.org/#:content@7:links@8>



Ten day regional blue crab trap closures will begin in Florida in July 2009. The closure will affect both commercial and recreational free standing traps. During the 10 day closure, all blue crab traps left in the water will be considered derelict (Image FWC)

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