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Lobster fishery remains battered

- [Fishing debate not over in NW Isles](#)

By [Jan TenBruggencate](#)
Advertiser Science Writer

The lobster fishery of the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands collapsed during the 1990s, and after being closed for six years, it is not recovering.

Overfishing, a widespread decline in oceanic productivity, or a combination of both are the most common reasons cited when the issue of blame arises.

Designation of the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands as a national monument last week should help ensure that what happened to the lobster fishery will never happen again. The monument was established by President Bush in a historic environmental move and takes in more than 140,000 square miles of reefs, atolls and islands — most of which are pristine because they exist in isolation.

The Northwestern Hawaiian Islands National Monument is now the largest marine refuge in the world.

The fishing industry, with the support of the Western Pacific Regional Fishery Management Council, started aggressively fishing lobsters in 1983, when it was getting more than three lobsters every time it set a trap on the underwater slopes of the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands.

The fishing continued, with two notable halts in the 1990s due to signs of population trouble, until the fishery was closed in 1999. By that time, three traps were being set to get one lobster.

But in the same period, there was a dramatic change in the productivity of the ocean, said Sam Pooley, director of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's Pacific Island Fisheries Science Center.

"Not only lobsters, but bird populations, reef fish populations, monk seal populations were all affected at the same time," he said.

The fishing catch numbers and the overall oceanic productivity information confused scientists and regulators alike.

"I find it hard to point (a) finger at the (fishery) council and attribute nefarious motives to them. I think they did their job. Unfortunately, as a group, the council and (NOAA) did not have an adequate grasp of the population dynamics of the species, and the species declined," said Bill Robinson, head of the Pacific Islands Regional Office for the NOAA Fisheries.

But others say the signs were clear: The drop in fishing efficiency — from three lobsters per trap to three traps per lobster — should have sounded the warning bells for everybody, said Environmental Defense senior scientist Stephanie Fried.

She said that the boats preferred spiny lobsters first, then slipper lobsters, and finally got permission to keep juveniles and females with eggs — on the argument that if they threw them back, only a small proportion would survive ravenous ulua to reach the bottom.

"They totally overfished it. It was for a tiny elite group of people to make a killer profit. That's all it was. It's a very small number of individuals. That's the whole story of this. It's management for a very small elite group of high-impact fishers," she said.

Hawaiian fisherman Isaac Harp said that the impacts went beyond the lobsters, since the traps were bringing up as many as 197

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different species of other things, including eel, octopus and other creatures — many of which would have been a food source for Hawaiian monk seals.

"It's such a bold and clear-cut example of a monomaniacal approach — to harvest and harvest and harvest, and to change the law to continue to harvest egg-bearing females and juveniles, and then to consistently deny there was any connection at all between the fishery and the loss of the lobsters," said Cha Smith, director of the Hawaiian-environmental alliance Kahea.

Jeff Polovina, one of the NOAA scientists who was advising the fishery council at the time, takes the blame for some of what happened to the lobster fishery. He said that in retrospect, it's clear that nobody understood the lobsters of those islands.

"I feel that maybe my advice to the council wasn't good," he said. "Today, the fishery has been closed for nearly a decade and it hasn't recovered, really. It could be that we're looking at populations that accumulate very slowly."

Robinson, while insisting the fishery council and his agency had no ill intent, conceded that their decision to allow a lobster industry to continue to fish may have been partly responsible for the collapse of the fishery.

"How much of that crash is directly attributed to overfishing and how much to environmental changes, I don't think anyone knows. There's no question that overfishing was involved, but it's clear to me that it wasn't intentional," he said.

Reach Jan TenBruggencate at jant@honoluluadvertiser.com.

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