Crabber Engagement and Documentation Field Report

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Prepared by: Bejat McCracken
Project: Commercial Crabber Engagement and Documentation – San Antonio Bay System

SUMMARY OF ACTIVITIES

Conducted direct engagement with commercial crabbers, seafood processors, bait shops, and community members throughout Seadrift, Port O'Connor, and surrounding areas. Activities focused on relationship-building, documenting fishery conditions, distributing outreach materials, and collecting observational data regarding environmental stressors impacting the San Antonio Bay system.

Engagement efforts included in-person conversations with active crabbers, visits to docks and processing facilities, participation in local commerce, and informal interviews regarding current fishery operations, environmental conditions, fishery declines, and crab mortality events. Outreach materials were distributed throughout the community at bait shops, seafood processing facilities, churches, community centers, restaurants, retail businesses, the local Post Office, and Chamber offices.

Trap construction and maintenance activities conducted by Chris Sibley with components used.

Partner Coordination

Built and strengthened relationships with key members of the local crabbing community and associated businesses, including Chris Sibley of Dockside Bait & Tackle, Lisa and The Nguyen, Coastal Seafood & Bait, Castaway Lodge, seafood processors, and multiple active commercial crabbers operating within the San Antonio Bay system.

Engagement efforts emphasized listening-based interactions, respectful in-person communication, and collaborative discussion regarding fishery concerns, abandoned trap recovery, and future stakeholder participation opportunities. Community members consistently emphasized the importance of practical solutions, relationship-based outreach, and clear communication.

Recommendations from community members included expanding multilingual outreach materials, particularly Vietnamese-language materials, improving trap tracking methods, and increasing stakeholder inclusion in long-term conservation planning and management.

Stacks of new crab traps built at Dockside Bait and Tackle to be sold wholesale to crabbers.

Key Findings

1. Severe Environmental Stress

Crabbers consistently reported severe drought conditions across the region, with little to no freshwater inflow observed for approximately 6–8 months. Reported impacts extend throughout San Antonio Bay, Mesquite Bay, and adjacent river systems, contributing to elevated salinity levels and broader ecological stress within the estuary.

Crabbers noted direct impacts to both crab and shrimp fisheries, with declining catch rates and increasing operational difficulty under current environmental conditions.

2. Significant Crab Mortality Event

Commercial crabbers reported substantial crab mortality events occurring throughout the system. Observations included approximately 100 pounds of dead crabs per day over the past month, increasing to an estimated 150–200 pounds per day in recent weeks. Potential cumulative mortality may now reach tons per week across the bay system.

Crabbers expressed concern regarding the cause of mortality, uncertainty surrounding where dead biomass is accumulating, and the long-term sustainability of the fishery under current environmental conditions.

Blue crabs brought in by Dockside crabbers to be sorted for sale to distributors.

3. Operational Constraints in the Fishery

Approximately six active commercial crabbers were observed operating daily within the system. Crabbers generally launched between 8:30–9:00 AM and reported operating approximately 200 traps per license, with roughly 100 traps deployed daily on alternating schedules.

Trap lines commonly consisted of 50–60 traps spaced approximately 50 feet apart, with parallel lines separated by roughly 50 yards.

Most vessels currently operating are not shallow-draft vessels, limiting the ability to recover traps in shallow shoreline habitats where abandoned traps frequently accumulate. Many crabbers also rely on low-tech or compass-based navigation systems, limiting precision in trap tracking and recovery.

Lost traps are often replaced rather than recovered due to difficult substrate conditions, vegetation fouling, broken lines, and limited access to stranded traps.

4. Declining Fishery Productivity

Crabbers reported noticeable declines in overall fishery productivity beyond blue crab harvests alone. One reported example included trout catches declining from approximately 90 trout per set two years ago to roughly 40 trout currently, suggesting broader ecosystem-level stress throughout the San Antonio Bay system.

Crabbers also noted reduced catch rates, increasing trap fouling from barnacles and sea squirts, warming waters, and prolonged drought conditions as contributing factors affecting fishery operations.

Chris Sibley bags bait shrimp for Dockside.

5. Strong Community Willingness to Engage

Despite ongoing environmental and economic challenges, the commercial crabbing community demonstrated strong willingness to engage in conservation and outreach efforts.

Key leaders and community contacts, including Chris Sibley and the Dockside network, continue to:

- Share information and observations
- Connect project partners with crabbers
- Support outreach and engagement activities
- Assist with relationship-building throughout the community

Crabbers consistently emphasized the value of direct communication, respectful engagement, and practical management solutions.

Fishery Economics and Operations

Commercial crabbers reported wholesale replacement costs of approximately $47 per trap, with estimated profit margins near $8 per trap. Bait costs remain substantial, with 50-pound frozen bait bags (of chicken legs) typically lasting approximately two weeks.

Routine trap maintenance requires frequent cleaning to remove vegetation and marine fouling organisms. Crabbers also discussed ongoing concerns regarding inspection compliance, declining catches, rising operational costs, and reduced profitability associated with current environmental conditions.

Examples of heavily fouled crab traps with marine vegetation accumulation, contributing to gear loss and abandonment. It reduces trap efficiencey and increases maintenance demands and loss.

Outreach Accomplishments

Outreach materials and program information were distributed through:

- Bait shops
- Seafood processors
- Churches
- Community centers
- Restaurants
- Retail businesses
- Post Office locations
- Chamber offices

Engagement strategies included:

- Vietnamese-language outreach recommendations
- Relationship-building through direct interaction
- Community-based storytelling and outreach
- Participation in local commerce and events

Chris Sibley participated in the 2026 Abandoned Crab Trap Removal Program with volunteer Kenneth LeFrance in the Upper San Antonio Bay, finding fouled traps and releasing trapped blue crabs.

New partnerships and engagement opportunities were initiated with:

- Dockside Bait & Tackle
- Coastal Seafood & Bait
- Castaway Lodge
- Local seafood processors and crabbers

Additional Issues Identified

Environmental Reporting

Crabbers reported observing an oil spill event within the system that reportedly required approximately six months of cleanup activity, highlighting the value of commercial fishermen as an informal environmental monitoring and early detection network.

Fishery Conflicts

Additional concerns were raised regarding increasing pressure from approximately 200 out-of-state oyster vessels and potential impacts to oyster reef habitats and bay resources.

Trap Loss and Recovery Challenges

Crabbers identified gear loss, fouling, and limited vessel access to shallow habitats as major contributors to trap abandonment and recovery in the bay system.

Distinctively colored Dockside built crab trap recovered ashore.

Recommendations

Immediate

- Schedule a Retired Crab Trap Event following key crabber availability on June 18th and work to increase participation
- Expand multilingual outreach materials, including Vietnamese-language materials
- Continue on-the-ground engagement and trust-building with the crabbing community
- Discuss potential strategies with County Marine Agent RJ Shelly for assistance from Texas Seagrant, and to explore other opportunities like Oystermen Coop

Near-Term

- Discuss options for a crabber-informed social media network and improved cooperation on joint issues
- Discuss options for trap tracking and recovery methods - potentially a custom-made app for phone and pad.
- Increase public education regarding trap avoidance, navigation safety, and trap reporting.

Local Seadrift Crabber, Bernardo Aldana (Benny) works at the Dockside Commercial Crab Trap Storage and Maintenance Lot.

Conclusions

Crabber engagement efforts revealed a commercial fishery experiencing acute environmental and economic stress associated with prolonged drought conditions, reduced freshwater inflows, elevated salinity, declining fishery productivity, and increasing operational costs.

Despite these challenges, the commercial crabbing community remains highly engaged and willing to collaborate on conservation, outreach, and management initiatives. Continued relationship-building and stakeholder inclusion will be critical for:

- Effective abandoned trap removal
- Early environmental detection and reporting
- Improved environmental awareness
- Sustaining fisheries and coastal ecosystems within the San Antonio Bay system

San Antonio Bay System illuminated by the golden glow of sunset.