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An abundance of shrimp, prawns points to major mismanagement

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By **ROBERT MCCLURE**
P-I REPORTER

ABOARD THE AUDACIOUS, OFF WHIDBEY ISLAND -- As Joe Verdoes stepped into the square wheelhouse of his fishing boat and headed toward Deception Pass last summer, he was confident he would make a big dent in his 600-pound-a-week quota of coonstripe shrimp.

"It's a real sustainable fishery," the veteran commercial fisherman said. "I'm proud to be associated with it."

Fishermen and state fisheries officials say shrimp and spot prawn populations appear to be thriving.

But that abundance actually may represent a serious imbalance in the Puget Sound ecosystem, and points to major problems in state management of marine species.

Shrimp and prawns are prey for many fish. But heavy fishing pressure was a major factor in depressing populations of first salmon and later of rockfish, cod, pollock and whiting during the 1980s and '90s.

With the fish largely gone, shrimp populations boomed.

"There is a tendency for these ... creatures who live along the bottom to blossom after the fish are reduced," said Daniel Pauly, a fisheries researcher at the University of British Columbia, in Vancouver. "So this is a good thing, shrimping, that is possible only because you have done a bad thing."

For commercial fishermen like Verdoes, it's one of the few good things left in Puget Sound.

Verdoes punches buttons on his Global Positioning System and his assistant, Jay Ferrario, hooks the shrimp traps up to a system of anchors and floats. Soon the floats are trailing out behind the boat.

"There's so few fisheries in Puget Sound," says Verdoes, who grew up in nearby Skagit County. In the summer, "You pretty much have to fish shrimp unless you want to go to Alaska."

Fearing a drastic drop in shrimp stocks in the 1990s, the state put an end to the super-fast "derby" fishery among commercial shrimp fishermen, in which boats competed to see who could catch the most before the quota was reached.

Instead, rules limited the number of commercial fishing vessels that could catch shrimp and prawns to only 18. Those licenses sell now for more than \$100,000 each.

The recreational fishery, however, is still an all-out mad dash. In some years, it has been closed in less than 24 hours. State officials have counted up to 2,000 boats on Hood Canal on opening day.

State officials say they intend to make the shrimp and prawn fisheries as environmentally sensitive as possible. For example, pots used by fishermen here specifically target shrimp. Their Canadian counterparts use nets, which haul in and kill many types of fish.



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Paul Joseph Brown / P-I

Fisheries for spot prawns and shrimp are booming. Experts say a big factor is a decline in the fish that feed on shrimp. But there are no solid population estimates.

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Mark O'Toole is one of the Fish and Wildlife biologists who sets quotas for shrimp fishing. He acknowledges that it's a "pretty crude" exercise. O'Toole simply puts pots out at the same place every year and compares how many shrimp he gets.

Officials also look over reports detailing how many shrimp and prawns were caught by commercial fishermen, and try to estimate the amount caught by recreational fishermen.

"We see more shrimp in areas where 10 years ago our commercial guys said there weren't many before," O'Toole said. "This is not rocket science. The general impression is that there seems to be more shrimp."

But this method of estimating populations is acknowledged to be imperfect even by the fishermen themselves.

"As far as having a real good hard stock assessment, it's not there," said Ken Crews, Verdoes' fishing partner and president of the Puget Sound Shrimp Association.

"Some of the shrimp fishermen think there are a lot more prawns out there," Crews said. "The state wants to manage conservatively and that's OK. We're the last ones who want to wipe out a fishery."

But critics say that's what fishermen have always said as they're depleting fish stocks, and that the business-as-usual approach won't work, as Fish and Wildlife's checkered record has shown. It was Fish and Wildlife, after all, that presided over the hammering of the fish stocks that has apparently allowed shrimp to boom today.

In the 1980s and '90s, salmon stocks took a beating. So Fish and Wildlife promoted catching rockfish -- only to discover that the long-lived rockfish don't even start producing young until they're in their teens. The heavy fishing snagged pre-reproductive fish and took a toll that could take decades to correct.

Sam Wright, a former biologist with the agency, recently submitted a petition to get endangered species protection for the rockfish. He's been waiting for the state to turn over an official report describing the fish's state of health, a report that former Gov. Gary Locke had ordered completed by the end of 2004. It's still not done. In the meantime, fishermen are allowed to keep the first rockfish caught on any day in most locations.

"Their attitude is really just in the absence of information, keep fishing," Wright said.

His fear: "All of a sudden you wake up and a species is gone."

P-I reporter Lisa Stiffler contributed to this report.

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