



FROM OUR WATERS

# AFTER THE CATCH

By Cyndi Mudge Photos by Ron Williams

**T**he riveting portrayal of commercial fishermen on “Deadliest Catch” has earned this high sea reality TV show the number one hottest hit for Discovery Channel and has won the hearts of millions of viewers around the world. The recent death of Captain Phil Harris who skippered the Fishing Vessel (F/V) Cornelia Marie rocked the emotional boat for his fans that have come to think of Captain Phil as their own personal friend.

“Deadliest Catch” features the commercial fishermen who fish the irascible and unpredictable Bering Sea off Alaska. Fishermen can be out at sea for weeks at a time working non-stop as they fill their coffers.

Yet, it is the local Northwest Dungeness Crab fisheries that have an even higher fatality rate than the famed waters off of Alaska. So how deadly is “The Deadliest Catch?” A study conducted by Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDCP) showed that the fatality rate for commercial fishermen in Oregon, California and Washington was about double the rate for other fisheries nation-wide, with Oregon waters taking the highest toll. The CDCP recorded 238 deaths per 100,000 fishermen in these local waters. By comparison, Alaska recorded 107 deaths per 100,000 and the annual average occupational fatality rate for all US workers is only about 4 per 100,000\*.

While “The Deadliest Catch” illustrates the danger and grueling working conditions commercial fishermen endure, there is more to the story about bringing the bounty of the sea to the table. The crew of any commercial

fishing boat is the first and most critical handler in ensuring the freshest and best fish are served. So as you order your next prized spring Chinook salmon lightly peppered with dill, prepare the grill for a halibut steak, or savor the delicate flavor of tuna sashimi, take a moment to consider the source.

“How the fish is handled from the moment it is taken from the water is the first and most important step in delivering high quality fish to market,” explained Ron Williams who has been a commercial fisherman for twenty years, owned a wholesale seafood distribution company, and now is Festival Director for Astoria’s Commercial Fishermen’s Festival. Different fish require different handling procedures to ensure the finest quality is delivered to the processors.

Some fish require flash freezing. Tuna, for example, is often bled, brined, and flash-frozen within minutes of being hauled on board. Most of the flash freezing is processed in Alaska waters in large vessels called catcher/processors. “People often think of frozen fish as inferior to fresh but in truth, when a fish goes from live to flash frozen within minutes, this is truly the best and freshest seafood available,” noted Chef Chris Holen, owner of Baked Alaska Restaurant. In fact, this flash freezing process also sterilizes the fish.

Locally, boats have the luxury of keeping their trips short. Captain Darren Reef, who skippered Pacific Seafoods flagship is known for being a highliner in the industry. Highliners are the top fishermen. “Locally, the best quality comes from a 3-4 hour haul,” notes Captain Reef. “After four hours the weight of fish crushes those on the bottom, reducing the quality of the return.”

*Mixed trawl-caught fish from the F/V Pacific Future skippered by Captain Darren Reef for Pacific Seafoods.*



*Captain Darren Reef of the F/V Pacific Future and Vice President of the Commercial Fishermen’s Festival.*

**“...I WANT THE HIGHEST PRICE I CAN GET FOR MY CATCH, SO BRINGING IN A QUALITY PRODUCT IS MY PRIORITY.”**

**Captain Darren Reef**

**T**he crew sorts and washes the fish as fast as possible. “When we haul red fish onboard it is critical to get it in the ‘hole’ fast before the sun bleaches out the fish.” The “hole” is storage beneath the deck filled with either cold brine or ice depending on the fish species being caught. Crab, for example, must be kept live for delivery to the processors while other fish are quickly iced for delivery.

Black cod, which is a higher end fish is also a softer fish. “We will only process five or six baskets at a time,” explains Captain Reef. “This ensures my crew can get the entire load on ice right away.” A basket typically holds 80 pounds of fish.

Reef noted that 100,000 lbs of hake can be hauled up and put into 32 degree refrigerated sea water within minutes or less of being caught. This ensures they are delivered as fresh as possible to the processors.

Shrimping is another lucrative fishery caught locally and Captain Reef finds that three day trips work best. “Going out longer just risks reducing the quality of the catch. I want the highest price I can get for my catch, so bringing in a quality product is my priority.” Shrimp is priced on size – the plumper the better – and quality – so keeping shrimp cold is critical.

Locally, most people are familiar with the delectable Dungeness crab and highly prized spring Chinook salmon. But the bounty of the Pacific Coast offers even more. Black cod, ling cod, and true cod are caught locally along with various species of rock fish and sole including rex, English, petrale, and Dover. Dover sole is the backbone of the fishing industry and black cod is highly sought after by foreign markets. Icing the fish or keeping it in controlled water temperatures is how most locally caught fish are kept at sea before bringing to the processors.

Each fish has its season and fishing boats must convert its gear to ready itself for the upcoming catch. Each fishery has its own gear. Trawling – working with nets (cod, rock fish, sole, perch and hake), long-lining (hook and line fishing), and trap fisheries are the most common forms of fishing. Gillnetting – a process reserved for catching salmon and sturgeon – requires special licenses that are tightly limited. This fishery is the oldest fishery on the Columbia River. This heritage has been handed down from father to son – and now daughters – for generations.

Modern fishing has created many advances that help keep fishing a sustainable resource. Excluders sewn into shrimp nets allow non-targeted fish to pass safely out of the top of the net. Captain Reef admitted that when excluders were first introduced he refused to use them. “The excluder was essentially a big hole in the

*Captain Dale Adams (center) and crew from the F/V Granada with a fresh haul of Dungeness Crab.*





LEFT Crew from the F/V Alyssa Ann sorting live crab.

BELOW Tote full of red rock fish.

WITH MY  
ELECTRONICS  
I CAN PICK  
MY NET UP  
AND OVER  
JUVENILE FISH  
AND BACK  
DOWN INTO  
THE POOL  
OF MATURE  
ADULTS.

Captain Darren Reef

net and I was convinced this would reduce not only the non-targeted species but allow the shrimp I was trying to catch to escape as well." Eventually, the excluder in the nets became mandatory and now Reef is a big fan. "The excluder works so well in reducing non-targeted species that it actually brings me a better catch because we spend less time removing non-targeted fish by hand."

Electronics also play an interesting role in sustainable fishing. Captain Reef has installed equipment that allows him to digitally measure the size of fish before setting his net. This allows him to target schools of fish that are going to give him the biggest retention for his catch as most fisheries limit fishermen in terms of size allowed. "This equipment allows me to cherry pick the larger fish, which often can be found in the middle of a school of smaller fish," explained Reef. "With my electronics I can pick my net up and over juvenile fish and back down into the pool of mature adults."

Salmon resuscitators are another interesting technique to help keep wild salmon plentiful. Occasionally, salmon are caught when fishing other species. A salmon resuscitator – often referred to by fishermen as "The Jesus Box" – actually brings a weak salmon back to prime condition. The salmon is put in a tank that uses a pump to circulate oxygen-rich river water over its gills. This method rejuvenates the fish well enough that it can be safely released back into the water to continue on its way to the spawning grounds.

Crabbing is the most familiar gear to most locals as pots are often spotted along the waterfront, stacked outside canneries or loaded onto trucks. Empty crab pots can weigh between 90 and 120 lbs and must be manually dumped and baited before setting the next catch. The work is non-stop and requires a great deal of stamina and team-work as the crew quickly sets or pulls pots from the ocean. Pot limits per boat range between 200 to 500 in Oregon. A cotton string is woven into the pots and are designed to decompose within thirty days in the event that the buoys are cut off by a propeller or carried further out to sea during a storm. The decomposed thread allows the crab to escape the pot. Fishermen hand sort crabs as they are pulled on board. Only male crabs that are a minimum size of 6 1/4" across the back are kept and the rest are returned to sea.

The next time you enjoy the succulent meat from a locally caught Dungeness Crab leg you'll know the journey that brought it to your table.

---

*Special thanks to the board members of the Commercial Fishermen's Festival for their input.*  
[CommercialFishermansFestival.com](http://CommercialFishermansFestival.com)

*\* The CDCP rates were taken from an article reported by Will Dunham for Reuter's news service, published April 28, 2008.*

