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## Research that Matters column (December 2022)

### *Sustaining an Important Fishery in Tough Times*

*By Jim Meek*

Michelle Theriault, a marine biologist at Université Sainte-Anne, tells her students to heap loving care on lobsters destined to markets in Auckland and Athabasca – and everywhere in between.

So, how do you dote on lobsters?

I dropped in on one of Theriault's Zoom classes for lobster exporters to get some answers to that question. And while she was narrow-casting her class from the University's Marine Research Centre at Petit-de-Grat, Cape Breton, lobster fishers were headed to sea to dump their traps on the opening day of the winter season south of Halifax.

It wouldn't be quite right to say the lobster fishery is facing troubled waters. Stocks have been in healthy shape since the 1950s, according to Theriault's colleague, Associate Professor Daniel Lane. In addition, lobster fishers have enjoyed a few great years despite a COVID blip, with record exports fuelling high prices for the harvest.

Still, the talk at the wharf suggests interesting times, if not troubled ones. A few days before the season opened, the upscale US grocer Whole Foods announced it would stop buying Maine lobster due to the fishery's possible impact on the endangered North Atlantic right whale. (The ban has not been extended to the Canadian sector, but the market chill is real.) The prospect of global recession also looms. And then there's the unkindest cut of all – prices were down when those South Shore fishers brought their first catches back to the wharf.

Against this backdrop, the work of Lane and Theriault, the director of the university's Marine Research Centre, is crucial. They conduct field research on the lobster supply-chain from the waters of the northwest Atlantic to seafood restaurants in Los Angeles and Shanghai. And they help the industry apply that research across the supply chain. For Theriault, that means providing a practical how-to-guide for handling lobsters from sea to shore to market. Here are just three ways to show love to lobsters.

Gently return 'berried hens' – pregnant lobsters – to the sea with their backs facing the water. That's far more protective of lobster eggs than plunking females – belly and eggs down - into the sea.

Handle lobsters as little as possible and don't toss them about like frisbees – which would only weaken them.

Put bands on the claws of every lobster you store in a tub or container. If you don't, the un-banded crustaceans can go postal and start cutting up and cannibalizing their fellow creatures.

Telling people how to better run their own lobster businesses isn't an easy job. After all, the fishery is comprised of fiercely independent souls who figure they already know how to handle, store and ship lobster. That's understandable. Theriault herself points out the region's fishery already harvests and exports the best-quality lobster on the planet. This is key to the industry's record of success. In 2021, the export value of lobster was [\\$3.2 billion](#), according to Statistics Canada. (It all comes from the Maritime provinces and Quebec.)

Still, Theriault and Lane have patiently earned credibility in the industry. Theriault, who has trained about 250 people this fall, has real-world experience in the industry. That's about as good a calling card as you can have in the fishery. (She worked in the lobster business for a decade before taking her job at the Petit-de-Grat campus in 2005.)

It also doesn't hurt that she and Lane live in a rural area, and work with rural people. (There's an alignment of values in the rural parts of Atlantic Canada that is often not well understood in provincial capitals.) Lane, who toiled for 30 years in what he called the "airy-fairy" world of pure research before taking his job at Université Sainte-Anne in 2015, says his former colleagues at the University of Ottawa would love an opportunity to do the kind of work he does today in applied research. "We've found a real niche here in lobster, working directly with people in the industry," he said.

Those close ties could prove essential as the world inches (or lurches) toward what some economists expect will be a global recession. The core goal of Theriault and Lane's work – maintaining quality Canadian lobster – is mission one. Accomplishing that goal has never been more important for the industry.

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