

## The Great Spiny One (*Panulirus interruptus*)

Ranger Jim Serpa

The water was cool and dark as night. Without my dive light I couldn't see my hand in front of my face. As I swam toward an area of submerged boulders I heard the unmistakable sounds of someone screaming through their snorkel. It is a strange sound, somewhat like a wounded seal or sea



lion. In the first milliseconds of hearing the sounds, I had thoughts of my partner being dashed against the rocks, crying out for help. Or maybe Sean was trying to warn me that he had spotted a large White Shark, and in his haste to alert me had forgotten to remove his snorkel from his mouth. As I flicked on my light, I instantly knew what the commotion was - the lobsters were out in force tonight.

Specifically, Spiny lobsters or, as the scientists call them, *Panulirus Interruptus*, unlike their East Coast relatives in Maine, lack claws. Before you feel too sorry for these lobsters because of their apparent lack of defensive apparatus, take a closer look. Spiny lobsters are covered by nasty spines on their antenna, carapace (head and body area) and tail. The spines, especially the ones on the tail, can and do inflict damage to anyone not careful when picking them up, or in our case, trying to catch them.

These lobsters can reach lengths of three feet and weigh in at an astonishing 30 pounds. According to California Fish and Game, the largest sport-caught spiny lobster was 16 pounds 1 ounce and was bagged in 1968. The chances of your finding one this large are pretty much slim and none, but 30 to 40 years ago they were fairly common. The law says if you want to take one home, you must possess a valid California fishing license, the lobster must have a carapace of at least 3-1/4 inches in length and be caught with your hands or a baited hoop net. The daily bag limit is seven.

You can find lobsters from Baja California to as far north as San Luis

Obispo. They live in water as shallow as tide pools and as deep as 100 feet or more. They are reported to live to the ripe old age of 75 years and become sexually mature at 5 to 7 years. It is very hard to tell the age of a lobster from its size because, depending on diet and living conditions, its size can vary to the extreme. They grow similarly to all crustaceans, molting their shell once or twice a year depending on conditions. The molting seems to slow down in frequency as they age. People walking down the beach often find these molts washed ashore by the tides. The molts look like exact replicas of the lobster that shed them. After careful examination by the finder you will see that it separates between the tail and the carapace and lacks any real weight, being essentially hollow.

Since spiny lobsters are for the most part nocturnal, the best time to see them is at night. During daylight hours you will find them stuffed into holes and rock crevices, sometimes by the dozens. But at night, they come out of their hiding spots and prowl for food which, by the way, can be anything under the ocean, plant or animal, living or dead.

Spiny Lobster reproduction takes place from spring to mid-summer. A female will carry eggs under her tail in numbers up to a million. These females are called "in berry" and are fertilized by the males who deposit paste-like sperm on the females abdomen. Several years ago, in our rock tank exhibit, we had two females "in berry" and a very pleased single male lobster in the tank with them. One afternoon I went into the aquarium room and was shocked to see thousands upon thousands of tiny

lobster larvae floating throughout the tank. If left alone in the wild the lucky few larvae would float around for about 6 months, then settle and develop into adult lobsters. Being that they were trapped in an enclosed aquarium, the filters and fish in the tank were having a field day. We never saw a single lobster from that hatching but it was truly an amazing sight to see those little guys cruising around in the tank. Also, the look of pure fish joy (at least that's what the look on the fishes' faces was, as interpolated by Picnic Coordinator Lori Coble) was pretty exciting. The sad part was that there was almost no one there to see it.

A couple of years ago the State Dive Team was doing a check-out dive at Crystal Cove State Park when we spotted, purely by luck, a couple of divers taking undersize lobsters underwater. They were ripping them apart and

stuffing their tails into their buoyancy vests. As a group, we confronted them underwater, motioned them to surface and told them that they were under arrest for poaching. Boy were they shocked. I will always remember one of the poachers asking our dive leader, Kenny Kramer, if we always patrolled so heavily. Kenny answered with a straight face, "Oh yes, especially during lobster season!" Lobster fishing, both commercial and sport, is heavily enforced by California Fish and Game, and for good reason. According to Fish and Game, if an undersized lobster (2-3/4 inch carapace) is taken in the 5 or 6 years it would have taken to reach legal size, she would have produced hundreds of thousands of eggs and from those eggs, even with high mortality, 2,937 legal-sized lobsters would have been produced by this one female!

Getting back to where I started, Sean and I did pretty well that night. Of course, we made sure that all our lobsters were legal size and that we didn't exceed our bag limit. We know that the laws are in place to insure there will be lobsters for future generations to enjoy. I just hope everyone else does