

# Mexico Baja California Red Rock Lobster



DATE CERTIFIED 27 April 2004;  
entered reassessment  
May 2009

SPECIES Red rock lobster  
(*Panulirus interruptus*)

FISHING METHOD Baited wire traps

COUNTRY Mexico

LOCATION



The Pacific coast of Baja  
California Sur, between  
Cedros Island and  
Punta Abreojos

FISHERY TONNAGE 1,300 tonnes

IN THE ten villages supported by this small, community-based fishery, MSC certification has brought empowerment twice over. “Before, these communities did not receive electricity from a governmental company,” says Mario Ramade, Senior Biologist with FEDECOOP (the Regional Federation of Fishing Industry Cooperatives). “Each provided its own power – but after certification, the federal government paid us more attention and implemented a programme to supply us. I have no doubt this was due to MSC certification.”

### Empowering communities

In addition to a \$20 million grant for electricity, the government has helped with fisheries infrastructure, access roads and drinking water – inspired, Ramade believes, by the international recognition and kudos gained from being an MSC-certified fishery. In his view, the social and political benefits far outweigh any commercial gain. “CONAPESCA, the Fisheries Department in Mexico, finances social programmes and gives us a seat on its national committee because of our certification,” he says. “It is an intangible benefit.”

### Low-impact fishing

Accomplished with support from World Wildlife Fund (WWF) US and Comunidad y Biodiversidad (COBI), a Mexican NGO, certification of the fishery is a model for successful collaboration between government, fishermen and conservation organisations. Each of the nine cooperatives belonging to FEDECOOP fishes an exclusive area under a long-term concession (or license) granted by the government. Unusually, each has its own biologist or technician to assist with data collection and provide scientific advice. Areas can be closed if there are concerns about stock, there is a minimum legal size for lobsters, females with eggs cannot be taken and only certain gear types are permitted. All traps must be fitted with escape gaps so under-size lobsters do not get caught.

Such measures, along with the type of boat (8m skiffs with outboard engines) and the size of the fleet (about 20 vessels per cooperative), meant the fishery was

low-impact – but few studies had been done to prove it. One condition of certification was that, within two years, the fishery should initiate “at least one research programme on ecosystem impacts”. Within a year, the Stanford CIBNOR Joint Project was under way, part of the ongoing Baja Biocomplexity Project led by Dr Fiorenza Micheli of Stanford University, California. One element was a dissertation by Geoff Shester, then a PhD student at Stanford. He and others monitored bycatch; left traps in the water for 10 days to simulate gear lost at sea, checking to see if lobsters were permanently retained (known as ‘ghost fishing’); tested biodegradable trap releases (a legal requirement since 2007) which rot in half the time, minimising the period in which ghost fishing can occur; and scuba-dived down to drop traps directly on top of sponges and corals, recording any habitat damage on video camera.

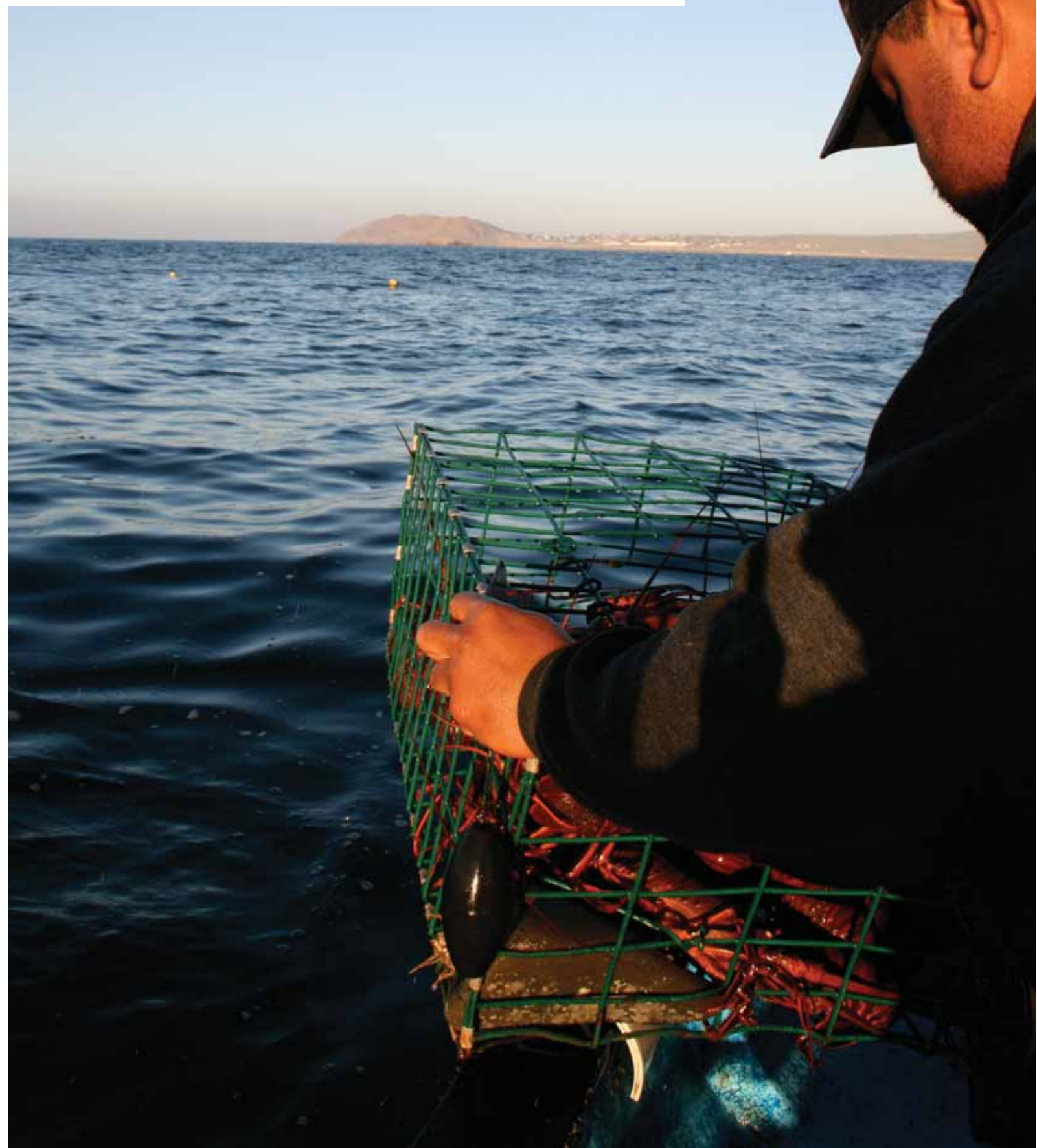
The research confirmed what the fishermen suspected. Traps had a minimal impact on the ecosystem, and ghost fishing was not occurring at levels that would significantly increase lobster mortality. “The studies reported here generally corroborate that the Baja California red lobster fishery has low ecosystem impacts,” Shester wrote in his 2008 thesis, “and is a shining example of a sustainable fishery that deserves continued MSC certification.”

### Retaining markets

This year, as the fishery enters reassessment (required every five years to remain MSC-certified), that hypothesis will be put to the test – but why did the fishery opt for a second term? “Right now, 95 per cent of our lobster is sold to Asia without the MSC label,” Ramade explains, “but we think the market will demand more and more MSC product. One day, the blue ecolabel will be obligatory – just as HACCP is for food safety – and without it, we will lose out. This community has no other alternative resources to develop. The fishery, especially lobster, is everything to us. We need to stay in this programme.”

“ The Baja rock lobster fishery has demonstrated that MSC certification not only improves community fisheries that are already well managed, but also empowers the people who depend on them for their livelihood ”

Meredith Lopuch, Deputy Director, WWF-US Sustainable Seafood Initiative  
(WWF is one of two NGOs that supported the fishery through the MSC assessment process)



“ Our initial target was to achieve a market premium because of MSC certification, but the real gain has been an intangible one – power to lobby the authorities for a better, fairer organisation of our community ”

Mario Ramade, Senior Biologist  
with FEDECOOP