

Invasion of the Crabs

King crabs invade Norwegian waters

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Photos by Stein Johnsen

The Cold War has been over for more than two decades, but a relentless red army of monster crabs are still pouring over the border of Russia into Norway. The crabs are feared by environmentalists, but not by scuba divers.

First introduced to the Barents Sea off northern Russia in the 1960s, Red King crabs (*Paralithodes camtschaticus*) are now spilling down western Norway by the millions. The first crab was spotted in Varangerfjorden in 1976. Since then, the crab has headed steadily west bound and is now found in large numbers west of the North Cape. The King crab roaming the sea floor of the Barents Sea is one of five species in the same family.

Three are native to Arctic waters, and two have their home waters along the California coast. The crab was taken from the Kamtsjatka Peninsula, on Russia's Pacific coast and introduced to the Barents Sea by Soviet scientists to get a better supply of seafood for the people in this part of the former Soviet Union.

Alien creature

As an introduced species, the crab is by many rated as an environmental hazard. Even though there has been research done on the crab for three decades, neither Russian or Norwegian scientists can agree on the future impact of the crab invasion on the local marine life. WWF Norway and other environmental groups have long raised their voices in concern for the impact on the

local marine life, as well as fish stocks and bottom dwelling animals. These groups accuse the Norwegian government of ignoring the possible consequences for the marine environment.

Estimates say that the total number of crabs is around 15 million in the Barents Sea. As these millions were



derived from only a few thousand at the beginning, the species have proven to be tough, prolific and enduring. In the mid 90s there was a scientific catch of the crabs, but only in small numbers. Commercial crabbing was first started by both the Norwegian's and the Russian's in 2003. The crab is regarded as a delicacy and can fetch up to USD 65 per kilo at fish markets in Oslo. It will be very difficult to stop this "red army" from marching on to battle fields further away just by fishing them, so it seems that we have to find other ways of controlling the population. For now, they have given the local fisheries another source of income, which by many is welcomed, as many coastal fish stocks are heavily depleted.

Docile monsters

Diving with this monster crab is not nearly as frightening as it seems. Although they can grow up to 180cm

(6ft) between the tips of their legs and weigh up to 9-10 kilos (20-22lbs), the crab is a rather docile creature. The first time I saw them under water was in the Jarfjord, just a few kilometres from the Norwegian-Russian border. We were told by the local divers that you can handle the crabs, but we were still a bit anxious when we encountered them for the first time.

They are bottom feeders, so you will most likely observe them sifting through the sea bed searching for everything from worms and molluscs to sea urchins and sea stars. The King crab is also known to add some vegetation to its diet and grazes on kelp and seaweed.

Or you can see them stride along the sea bed, either single or in large numbers. I must admit that the first time I saw a pile of 40-50 of these

beasts, I wasn't too eager to get too close. After having caught my first crab with my neoprene protected hands, much of the monster stories lost their sting. They are indeed beautiful crustaceans and will not run if you decide to have a closer look at them.

You don't have to venture very deep to see the crabs. They have been found as deep as several hundred meters, but are very frequently found in shallow coastal waters. You will find the King crab year around, but in the spring (March-May) they usually can be found in large quantities at depths easily dived by most, from 30 meters and up. We also caught a few crabs to cook, because they really are delicious. The taste and texture ranging somewhere between lobster and shrimp. While frowned upon by many, for Norwegian divers, this alien monster of the deep is a delicacy and an exciting newcomer to their underwater back yard. ■



fact file



Norway



History After two centuries of Viking raids into the European continent, Christianity was adopted by King Olav Tryggvason in the year 994. Over the next several decades, conversion of the Norwegian kingdom took place until Norway was absorbed into a union with Denmark in 1397 that lasted for more than four centuries. Sweden tried to cede Norway in 1814, but Norwegians resisted and adopted a new constitution. Sweden then invaded Norway, but finally agreed to let Norway keep its own constitution in exchange for accepting a union under a Swedish king. But rising nationalism during the 19th century led to a 1905 referendum, which won independence for Norway. World War I saw heavy losses for Norway in shipping, even though it remained neutral. At the outset of World War II, Norway proclaimed its neutrality again, but was nonetheless occupied for five years by Nazi Germany (1940-1945). In 1949, neutrality was finally abandoned when Norway joined NATO. IN the 1960s, oil and gas were discovered in adjacent waters, which boosted Norway's economic fortunes. The country's current focus remains on containing spending on the extensive welfare system. Norway continues to plan for the moment when petroleum reserves become depleted. However,

Norway rejected joining the EU through a referendum held in 1972 and 1994; Government: constitutional monarchy

Geography Norway is located in northern Europe and is bordered by Finland 727 km, Sweden 1,619 km and Russia 196 km. Two-thirds of the country are covered by mountains; Norway has one of most rugged and longest coastlines in world with some 50,000 islands off its fjord indented shoreline; It holds a strategic location adjacent to sea lanes and air routes in North Atlantic; Terrain: Norway was shaped by glaciers which carved out fertile valleys and fjords from high plateaus and rugged mountains; Norway also has small, scattered plains and arctic tundra in the north; Lowest point: Norwegian Sea 0 m; Highest point: Galdhopiggen 2,469 m; Coastline: 25,148 km (includes mainland 2,650 km, as well as long fjords, numerous small islands, and minor indentations 22,498 km); length of island coastlines 58,133 km); Natural resources: petroleum, natural gas, iron ore, copper, lead, zinc, titanium, pyrites, nickel, fish, timber, hydropower; Natural hazards: rockslides, avalanches; Environmental issues: water pollution; acid rain damaging forests and lakes and threatening fish stocks; air pollution from vehicle emissions; Capital: Oslo

Climate is temperate along the coast, influenced by the North Atlantic Current; Norway has a colder interior with more precipitation and colder summers; the west coast is rainy year-round

Population 4,593,041 (July 2005 est.); Ethnic groups: Norwegian, Sami 20,000

Economy A capitalist welfare state, Norway has an economy that combines free



market activity and government intervention. Key areas such as the vital petroleum sector are controlled by the government through large-scale state enterprises. The country is richly endowed with natural resources such as petroleum, hydropower, fish, forests and minerals. With one-third of its exports being oil and gas, Norway is highly dependent on its oil production and international oil prices. Only Saudi Arabia and Russia export more oil than Norway. While Norway opted to stay out of the EU in 1994, it still contributes a substantial amount to the EU budget. Privatization has been encouraged by the government and Norwegians worry about the day, which will come in the next two decades, when the oil and gas will start to run out; So, the country has been saving its oil-boosted budget surpluses in a Government Petroleum Fund, which is invested abroad and now has now reached a valued of more than US\$150 billion. The early part of the new millenium saw lackluster growth of the country's GDP, but growth picked up by 2005. Industries: petroleum and gas, food processing, shipbuilding, pulp and paper products, metals, chemicals, timber, mining, textiles, fishing; Agriculture: barley, wheat, potatoes; pork, beef, veal, milk; fish

Currency Norwegian Krone (NOK); Exchange rate: NOK per US dollar = 6.62; NOK per Euro = 7.97

Decompression Chamber

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Web sites

- Norway Tourism
www.visitnorway.com
- Nordkapp Dykkesenter / North Cape Adventures
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