



The Secret Life of Lobsters

By Trevor Corson
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Introduction

Once considered "poverty food" by colonial settlers, American lobsters are a culinary treat enjoyed by millions the world over. But lobsters are much more than just a main course -- and in **The Secret Life of Lobsters**, journalist **Trevor Corson** dives deep into their intriguing story and reveals the fascinating habits and behaviors of these remarkable creatures.

The Secret Life of Lobsters also takes us on a sea-sprayed voyage with fishermen and scientists as they join forces to preserve the future of these clawed predators, whose undersea life has remained murky as the ocean depths. Through an engrossing combination of science, history, and local folklore, Corson sheds light on the centuries-old tradition of Maine lobster fishing while showcasing the exhaustive (and sometimes quirky) scientific experiments mounted to research *Homarus americanus* -- and the result is a narrative that is as interesting, engaging, and surprising as the lobsters themselves.

Named a best science book of 2004 by *USA Today* and *Discover* and a best book of the year by *Time Out New York*, **The Secret Life of Lobsters** is an entertaining and rollicking odyssey -- and one that will forever change how you look at the world's favorite crustacean.

Questions for Discussion

1. Before reading this book, did you know much about lobsters and their behaviors? What are some of the more surprising aspects of lobster life that you've learned?
2. In discussing the economic perils of pursuing lobstering as a living, Bruce Fernald mentions an old saying referring to lobster traps as "'poverty crates' full of 'bugs'." (p. 22) Given the limited -- and somewhat unreliable -- financial reward that lobstering has offered in the past, why do you think so many children followed their parents into this line of work?
3. "It is said that lobstermen are the cowboys of the American East." (p. 4) Cowboys -- and lobstermen -- have come to embody a sense of rugged individualism and independence, as a result of their exploration of unknown frontiers. What are some examples of similar American livelihoods?
4. The exhaustive work of the scientists and biologists depicted in this book can be described almost as a calling. Discuss the differences between a profession and a vocation.
5. Different views are expressed about how to best maintain the lobster population. Before you began to read this book, which group would you have been more inclined to believe -- scientists, government officials, or lobstermen? Why? After having read the book, do you feel the same way?
6. In Chapter 16, Jack Merrill prepares for his first underwater dive. Is it surprising that he's never seen the ocean floor in his 25 years of lobstering? Consider, too, the complaints by lobstermen that scientists rarely join them on lobster boats to observe their work; is that surprising as well? Why or why not?
7. In the acknowledgments, the author refers to his lifelong "lobster obsession." What similar obsessions might you share? What do your obsessions, and the degree to which you have such obsessions, reveal about you?
8. The author describes life on the remote island of Little Cranberry Island in vivid detail. Would you be able to live in such a place? What are the benefits and drawbacks of living in an isolated location?
9. The battle between government scientists and the Maine Lobstermen's Association to protect the lobster population is described throughout the book. At one point, Jack Merrill reads a section of an independent report that supported his argument for not changing the minimum-size law; the government, however, had continued to promote the new law despite the independent report. Bob Steneck had trouble gaining access to government evidence that reinforced his theories. Using science to promote a particular policy or point of view -- how else is this demonstrated in society today?
10. Government regulators produce reports and research to support raising the minimum-catch size, while lobstermen record data via relatively crude methods (v-notching, Katy Fernald's coffee cans). Hard scientific research versus anecdotal evidence collected over multiple generations -- which are you more inclined to believe? Why?
11. Many people might be squeamish about consuming lobsters after reading this book. But most of the people profiled here heartily enjoy eating lobsters ("Knowing all about lobsters makes them a more interesting meal," page 275). Can appreciation and respect for an animal be reconciled with the desire to eat it? Why or why not?

About the Author

Trevor Corson spent his boyhood summers on the Maine coast, and later in life he worked aboard commercial lobster boats. As a journalist, he has written on subjects as diverse as organ transplants, Japanese Buddhism, and Chinese politics, and his work has appeared in the *New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and the *Boston Globe*. **The Secret Life of Lobsters** -- Corson's first book -- originated from an essay he wrote for the *Atlantic Monthly*. He lives in Boston.