Lobster divers dying in Honduras, struck with paralysis and decompression illness

The lobster from Honduras' Miskito Coast is to die for – literally.

Seafood fishermen from the country's poverty stricken Caribbean coast are dropping dead from decompression sickness known as "the bends" caused by diving too-deep without the proper equipment, all in pursuit of the luxury crustacean they call "red gold," MSNBC.com reported. "It's incredibly dangerous, what they are doing," diving safety expert Eric Douglas told the network. "They are diving so far beyond anything that we would consider to be within acceptable limits.

"They are poorly trained. They are poorly equipped. They have none of the basic things that divers today would consider mandatory equipment – pressure gauges, alternate air sources, even a buoyancy control vest to help them float underwater without effort," he told the news site.
Armed with little protection, lobster divers still plummet to dangerous depths of up to 120 feet, sometimes sixteen times in one day. The lobster, 90% of which is shipped to the U.S. can fetch up to $3 per lbs, worth risking paralysis and even death if they stay down too long. Many injured fishermen find themselves in the hands of Dr. Elmer Meija, who has treated more than 250 divers in the past three years at his clinic in La Ceiba, Honduras.

Meija's clinic features the only existing hyperbaric chamber used to treat the diving-induced illness. "We feel very pleased when they improve very quickly at the chamber, but sometimes we are kind of scared because if they improve so quick, so fast, they will think the hyperbaric chamber makes miracles," Meija told MSNBC.com. "So they will go back again diving and the next time can be the last time."
Meija often visits his patients along the Miskito coast, about 200 miles from his clinic. There, people have no electricity or running water. Most families in the remote area have at least one family member who was injured diving.

Many of his patients are paralyzed, and will never recover. "It's very difficult when you see very young people paralyzed from the neck down below and you know they will not improve," he told the website. Honduras' government is working to find a solution to the deadly diving cycle, as no law currently prevents the import of lobsters caught by the Miskito men into the United States. USAID and the World Bank are providing funding that will help the divers find other work if a ban is implemented.