

[Biddeford, Saco, Old Orchard Beach Courier?By Kristin Sims-Kastelein, Staff Writer](#)

The Love Maine Lobster Game appears at first glance to resemble any arcade game at the mall. The fire engine red rectangular box stands four feet tall, with an oversized red claw inside and prizes below. A joystick allows the operator to direct the claw to catch the prize.

The prize is not a fuzzy stuffed toy, but a live lobster.

The game's concept is not new. There are other smaller models on the market. "We took the concept and perfected it," said Joe Zuccherro, president and CEO of Marine Ecological Habitats of Biddeford. He said the company spent two-and-a-half years researching and developing the product.

During the research and development phase, Zuccherro said, the company outlined three objectives. They wanted to improve the filtration system, protect mechanics from corrosion and create a safe claw, maintaining the game's challenge.

The main obstacle was corrosion from salt water, which eats away at metals. The company solved that problem by using acrylic.

The company has sold two games in Maine, one to Bentley's Saloon in Arundel and the other to Eight Corners, a store in Scarborough. They have sold 12 games throughout the U.S.

The company claims the \$14,950 investment pays for itself in a year. The game costs \$2 for a 30-second turn.

The company began by selling tanks and aquariums to commercial vendors such as Hannaford and Maine Medical Center. They expanded into the lobster claw game roughly a year ago. All of their products are made in Biddeford, at a Pearl Street location staffed by about 10 people. Zuccherro is most passionate about the company's touch tanks, large acrylic aquariums that are used to display sea life up close.

"We have a great tool for teaching, but the schools cannot afford them," he said, noting the tanks cost \$7,000 apiece. He has set up an independent non-profit organization called "Touch Tanks for Kids," which provides matching funds to schools interested in purchasing a tank. St. James School received its tank a few weeks ago and Lincoln School in Portland will have one installed in the next couple weeks.

Currently, St. James School has its touch tank prominently displayed in the cafeteria.

"The kids see it everyday," sixth-grade teacher Jaime Pappalardo said.

"They come back from lunch talking about the animals and making guesses about where the animals are hiding in the tank or which animal ate the other."

School officials set up the tank a week ago and have begun adding crabs, hermit crabs, starfish and anemones.

"The kids love it," Pappalardo said. "It makes it more real. They are completely interested and involved."

St. James School students spend a large part of the year studying the ocean. Next week they will begin to study salinity. Students will be taking salt-water measurements in the tank and talking about why the water needs to be moving in a salt water tank all the time.

School officials say the \$3,500 raised for the tank is money well-spent.

"\$3,500 is not difficult to raise," Zuccherro said. "Sometimes the PTO (Parent Teacher Organization) gives monetary support or someone donates the money."

At present, \$3,500 from the sale of each Love Maine Lobster Game goes toward the touch tank

program. Zuccherro says he is looking for other sponsors as well.

Animal rights activists have spoken out against Zuccherro's Love Maine Lobster Game, saying the game is not teaching a good lesson to children or adults.

The Maine Animal Coalition (MAC) says the state's lobster industry is only now beginning to follow the standards for humane treatment of lobsters set by European countries, New Zealand and Australia.

"Even if we cannot be sure (lobsters) can or can't (feel pain), we need to make sure that they do not suffer," says the MAC website. Animal activists say lobsters do feel pain and that companies and consumers should treat them humanely.

"This game is adding insult to injury," says MAC President Christina Connors. "They can't go anywhere or get away. Not only will they be boiled alive, but they are being taunted in the meanwhile."

As for Zuccherro, he likes the game's challenge, saying it reminds him of his fishing days.

"I think it is the challenge that drives the sale of the product," he said. "If one person plays it, more people come to watch."