

Name _____

Date _____

FACT SHEET

Life Cycle of the Blue Crab

- Crabs live in *estuaries* (where salt water and fresh water mix) along the Atlantic and Gulf Coasts.
- When the female reaches maturity, she migrates to the mouth of the Chesapeake Bay (where the Bay meets the Atlantic Ocean) where she lays her eggs. She will carry them on her abdomen for several weeks. The egg mass is called the **sponge**.
- Crabs start life as one egg among millions of fertilized eggs, carried on the abdomen of a mature female crab.
- The eggs (**larvae**) are released near the mouth of the Chesapeake Bay from May until October.
- Once the eggs hatch, the larvae drift out toward the sea. This first stage is called **zoea**. Out in the sea, the **zoeae** molts (sheds its outer shell) many times before entering the second larval form.
- The second stage of the crab's life is called the **megalops**. The crab now resembles a crayfish or lobster. It can swim freely, but tends to stay close to the bottom, near the shoreline.
- Soon it molts into the tiny blue crab people recognize, and it becomes known as a **juvenile crab**. This juvenile gradually moves towards more shallow and fresher water in the upper Bay and rivers.
- **Juvenile males** migrate further up into the rivers for the fresher water, where they bury themselves in the mud in winter (growth and molting stops at this time) and come out again in the spring.
- **Juvenile females** stay closer to the mouth of the rivers near the Bay, where the water has a higher salt content.
- In spring, the juveniles begin to grow and molt.
- Now they will use underwater grasses (SAV's) for feeding and protection.
- Moving freely throughout the Bay, they will finally reach the **adult** stage in the spring or summer, a year after hatching.

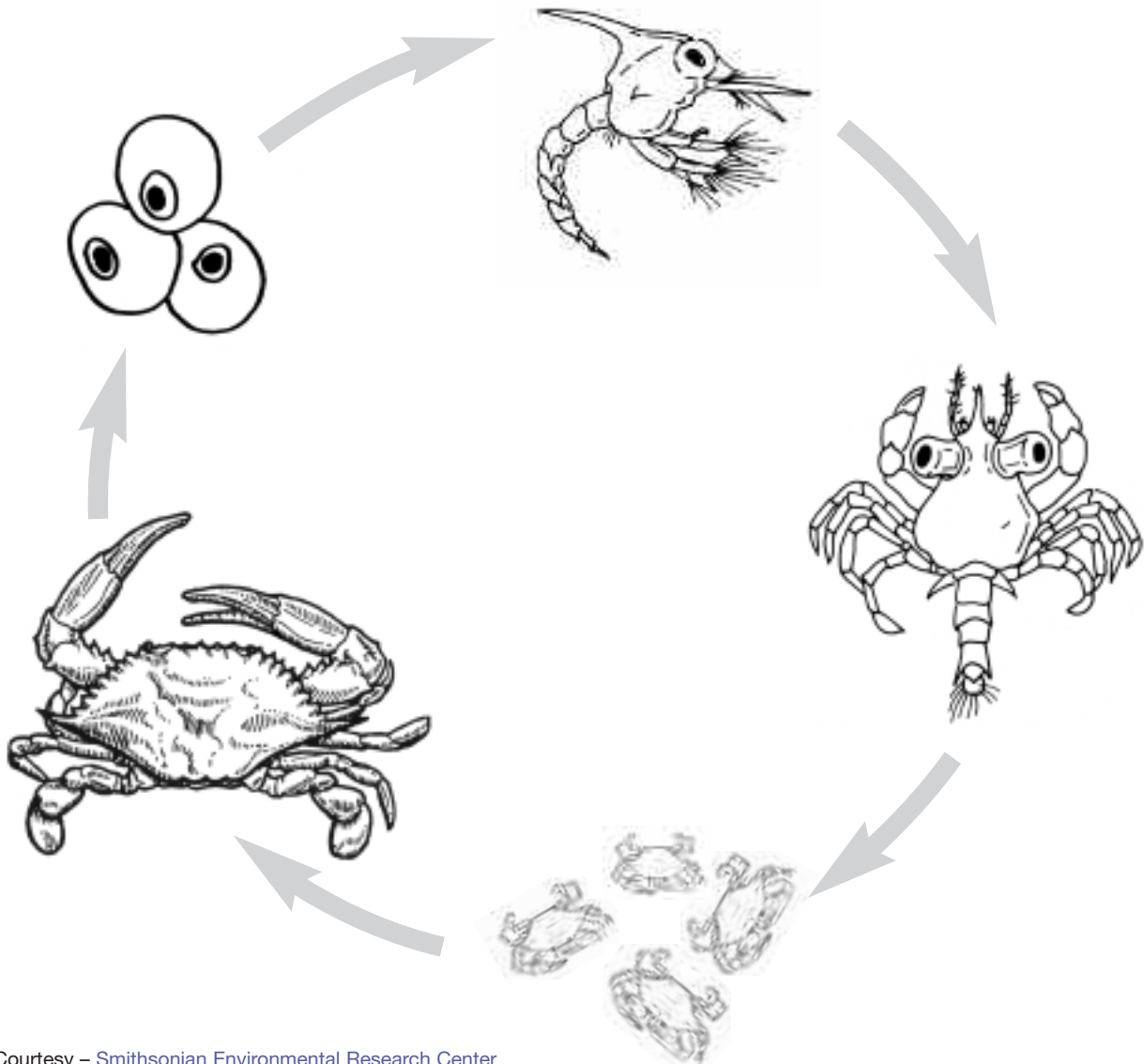
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Life Cycle of the Blue Crab

Directions: Label the stages of the blue crab on the diagram below.

WORD BOX		
EGGS	ZOEAE	MEGALOPS
ADULT CRAB		JUVENILE CRABS



Courtesy – [Smithsonian Environmental Research Center](http://www.smithsonianenvironmentalresearchcenter.org)

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Life Cycle of the Blue Crab

Directions: Use information from the “Fact Sheet” to illustrate the life cycle of a blue crab on the map of the Chesapeake Bay.



Courtesy – National Aquarium