

Frequently asked Questions

Crayfish removal, control and trapping:

1. Are crayfish freshwater lobsters?

Yes, they are crustaceans just like lobsters and crabs.

2. Have we (the UK) always had them in our rivers and lakes?

We do have 1 species of native crayfish - the white clawed crayfish (*Austropotamobius pallipes*) the species can be found in lots of places including canals, streams, rivers, lakes, reservoirs and water-filled quarries. Populations are concentrated in northern and central England. It is smaller than the non-native signal crayfish.

3. What are alien crayfish?

Many newspapers have picked up this term. It refers to species of crayfish that are not originally from the UK and includes the American signal crayfish (*Pacifastacus leniusculus*) and this has been shown to pose a threat to the native species due to competition for food, predation and the spread of the disease "crayfish plague". There are several other species that you can come across including the Turkish crayfish and Louisiana swamp crayfish.

4. Why are signal crayfish such bad news?

Imported in the 1970s to be commercially bred for food, the American signal crayfish is bigger, much less fussy about its food and more vigorous than the British crayfish, and when the live crayfish farming market collapsed in Britain during the mid 1980s, commercial stocks were abandoned or neglected. Signal crayfish can climb and walk considerable distances and in no time they took over streams and rivers formerly inhabited by British crayfish, damaging plant, fish and invertebrate life. They can burrow up to 1.2m into river banks, in some cases have damaged them, and as a final thrust, they have spread 'crayfish plague' which is a fungal disease (*Aphanomyces astaci*) - fatal, not to them, but to British crayfish

5. OK, they are bad for our rivers - why don't we just get rid of them?

Once present in a river or lake, they are impossible to get rid of completely - we have tried on many occasions but have never been successful. The only options left is to reduce numbers down to levels where they are not a nuisance and, most importantly, prevent them from spreading any further.

6. Are there rules and regulations about taking crayfish?

The Native White-clawed Crayfish is listed on Schedule 5 of the Wildlife & Countryside Act 1981, which makes it illegal either to take it from the wild or sell it without a licence from the appropriate nature conservation agency.

It is highly protected and is included in the IUCN Red Data List. You would only be given a licence for scientific purposes. Certain river catchments are designated special areas of conservation for the native crayfish. An example would be the River Eden in Cumbria. More information can be found at:

<http://www.jncc.gov.uk/protectedsites/sacselection/species.asp?FeatureIntCode=S1092>

A new byelaw for trapping crayfish in England and Wales came into force on the 1st of June 2005. The byelaw aims to restrict accidental or deliberate transportation of alien crayfish and 'crayfish plague', whilst still allowing the legitimate trapping of the crustaceans.

Crayfish are trapped for a number of reasons, including:

Conservation - to re-establish native species in a particular area, or to relocate them during work taking place in their habitat;

Scientific Research - including investigations into interactions between crayfish and other species in the wild, or investigations into methods of controlling the non-native species;

Fisheries management - signal crayfish can become a nuisance for anglers by taking their bait or burrowing in riverbanks

7. Great, so I can go out and trap them?

Not so fast! Permission to trap crayfish will be dependant on the local situation in particular the presence of the native white claw crayfish.

Unless the trapping is done responsibly it could make the situation worse or even cause further spread. If you decide that trapping is the best way to get rid of the nuisance, then you must commit to doing this continuously and not on an occasional basis. Otherwise, you will only remove the larger male signal crayfish, which cannibalize the smaller ones so they have the effect of keeping total numbers down. Continual, aggressive trapping **will** reduce numbers but if you stop you may make things even worse as you will have altered the balance in that area of river.

7. Our club still thinks trapping is the best option. What do I do now?

You need to speak to your local Environment Agency office. There will be a fisheries officer that sorts out all permissions in his/ her area. They will have the local knowledge and can advise you on the best course of action. You must also have the permission of the landowner. The byelaw sets out certain conditions that will have to be met including the non-return of any crayfish, the

need for any trap to be tagged and that you will need to tell us how many crayfish you remove. It also tells you what type and size of trap is legal. If people break the byelaw, the alleged offence will be investigated and action will be taken in line with the Agency's prosecution policy. If the offence were of sufficient severity then the matter would be taken to court, if found guilty the offender may have their traps forfeited by the court and/or a fine, of up to £2500, imposed on them. Advice is available by calling 08708 506506 and online at the Environment Agency's website www.environment-agency.gov.uk Crayfish trapping advice packs are also available from the National Fisheries Laboratory 01480 483968.

8. My mate catches them by rod and line. Should he put them back?

Under the Wildlife and Countryside Act it is actually illegal to introduce alien species such as signal crayfish back into the wild. So in theory, your friend would be committing an offence by "releasing" it back into the river where he caught it. In reality that does lead to some problems:

- What do you do with it? Ideally it should be killed.
- How do I know it is a signal crayfish and not a native one? You probably do not as they are quite hard to tell apart.

Pragmatically, We would recommend that if you are in doubt or can't kill it, you just return it to the water you caught it from. The reasoning would be that a lot of people would not be able to kill them so may take them home and put in a garden pond - which runs the risk of them moving to other waters. There will be no real difference in population if you return a crayfish to the water you found it - as many hundreds will be present and most importantly we do not want them moved alive off site. However if it was a native crayfish (although unlikely as they are not as easily caught by rod and line), every single one counts.

9. I know big chub like to eat crayfish - can I use them as bait?

No you can't. It is illegal to use crayfish of any species, alive or dead, whole or in bits as bait. To allow crayfish as bait could encourage some individuals to move crayfish or introduce them into other waters. Even dead and liquidised, the signal crayfish can carry crayfish plague. The fungal spores of crayfish plague can survive for up to two weeks in water and temperatures well below freezing. The easiest way of ensuring that this does not happen is to ban any bait containing crayfish.

10. I have heard that they are good to eat - is this true?

We have heard this as well!