

The South West Crayfish Partnership South West Crayfish Strategy 2013-2018

Lydia Robbins¹, Andrew Whitehouse², Jen Nightingale³, Mary-Rose Lane⁴, Melissa Clarkson⁴, Peter Sibley⁴, Martin Frayling⁴, Lucy Rogers¹ & Chris Ayre²
(¹ Avon Wildlife Trust, ² Buglife, ³ Bristol Conservation & Science Foundation, ⁴ Environment Agency)

The White-clawed crayfish is the only species of crayfish native to the UK and has declined dramatically throughout much of its range since the 1970s, in particular due to introductions of invasive non-native crayfish species and associated pathogens. Habitat degradation, pollution and changes to water quality have also contributed to the species' decline.

The White-clawed crayfish *Austropotamobius pallipes*, is classed as Globally Endangered by IUCN / WCMC and is listed under both the EC Habitats Directive and the Bern Convention. In the UK it is protected under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (as amended) and is highlighted as a Priority Species for conservation action under the UK Biodiversity Action Plan (UK BAP).

Data collected by the Environment Agency in South West England, indicates that this species has suffered a 70% decline (occurred in 87 Water Framework Directive subcatchments prior to 1975, but was only found in 26 of these by the end of 2008)¹. This calculation could underestimate true decline with subpopulations under increasing threat. At a county level, the threat may be more acute. Devon holds two remaining wild populations of White-clawed crayfish, both of which are estimated to be at risk of extinction within five years.

To date, conservation action for White-clawed crayfish in the South West has focussed on the strategic establishment of safe-haven Ark sites, surveys of wild populations, landowner engagement and the development of a captive breeding programme².

The South West Crayfish Partnership (SWCP) is a collaboration between Buglife – The Invertebrate Conservation Trust, Avon Wildlife Trust, Bristol Conservation & Science Foundation and the Environment Agency. The SWCP was established in 2008 in response to the severe decline of native White-clawed crayfish in South West England and is currently running the largest strategic programme of re-homing at-risk populations of White-clawed crayfish to new safe sites.

To date, the partnership has been supported by funding from Aggregates Levy Sustainability Fund, BBC Wildlife Fund, Biffa Award, Bristol Water, Environment Agency, Heritage Lottery Fund, Natural England, and the Pennon Environmental Trust.



¹ Sibley P J, Holdich D M & Lane M (2009). Invasive crayfish in Britain: management and mitigation. *International Urban Ecology Review*, 4, pp. 105–18.

² Nightingale J, Sibley P, Robbins L, Frayling M and Stenson C (2008). *South West White-clawed Crayfish Conservation Strategy 2008-2012*. South West Crayfish Partnership.

South West White-clawed Crayfish Conservation Strategy: 2008-2012

Phase 1 of the project, guided by the first strategy (Nightingale *et al*, 2008), developed a strong partnership, built on regional expertise and has achieved significant impact. Since 2008 the Partnership has:

- translocated more than **4,000** White-clawed crayfish from 8 threatened populations to **14 new Ark sites** across the region
- implemented a **survey and monitoring** programme of wild crayfish populations
- **engaged** landowners and managers through surveys and monitoring work
- established a **captive breeding** population (breeding over 1300 crayfish) and public exhibit of White-clawed crayfish at Bristol Zoological Gardens, and a second in planning at Paignton Zoo
- run an **education programme** highlighting the threats to White-clawed crayfish and promoting measures for their conservation amongst the public, landowners and key stakeholder groups such as anglers. The outreach programme has reached over 1600 school children and over 2 million other members of the public
- hosted a national crayfish conservation conference in 2010.

However, the region's White-clawed crayfish wild populations remain under threat of extinction. A second strategy has been developed in order to agree priorities for the partnership and our wider stakeholder groups for the next five years.

Whilst the need for establishing further Ark sites remains, it is a challenge to find suitable sites. And so this next strategy focuses more on the monitoring and conservation of wild populations, and the monitoring and consolidation of our Ark site populations. Where opportunities for new Ark sites arise we hope that the Partnership are able to act opportunistically to utilise sites for the conservation of threatened crayfish populations. We will also continue to maintain and develop the captive breeding and education programmes.

These aims are, of course, funding dependant. The Partnership will work to develop new projects and identify funding opportunities to deliver the aims.

Strategic aims 2013-2018

The SWCP will work in partnership to:

1. **identify and prioritise threats** to remaining populations of White-clawed crayfish and take appropriate action
2. **implement an ongoing monitoring programme of remaining wild populations** of White-clawed crayfish, to advance our understanding of crayfish ecology and prioritise those in need of conservation action
3. **monitor existing Ark sites** to measure success inform further action needed, advance our knowledge for successful establishment of Ark sites and their use as a conservation tool
4. **identify new Ark sites** and where necessary, translocate at-risk populations
5. **establish a strategic monitoring programme of non-native crayfish species** in the region and investigate methods for control **and eradication**
6. maintain a database of crayfish species records and ensure **up to date records** are shared between stakeholders
7. **maintain viable breeding populations** of White-clawed crayfish *ex situ*, and utilise these for establishing new Ark sites, for outreach and to advance our understanding of crayfish ecology
8. **educate and engage the public** and stakeholders with crayfish conservation issues, highlighting threats to White-clawed crayfish populations in the South West and promoting measures for their conservation such as “check, clean, dry”
9. continue to **share our knowledge** and experiences outside of the region to support White-clawed crayfish conservation.