

## When conservation means business

Abigail Stancliffe-Vaughan is Community and Biodiversity Project with the Brecks Partnership; a countryside management and sustainable tourism project based in Thetford in the Norfolk and Suffolk Brecks. Here she advocates a business like approach to managing an alien invasion.

I happened upon the Lark Angling and Preservation Society (LAPS) in the autumn of 2004. Watching the Chairman talk about his group's efforts to rid the River Lark of its massive alien crayfish population made me feel that I must lend a hand in my role as a full-time 'conservationist'.

Our work began with a "Trapping and Research Feasibility Study", so titled in an attempt to shush the chorus of "it'll never work so why try". Our aim was to increase trapping effort along the River Lark in the Suffolk Brecks and possibly prove that a little effort by many may add up! We very quickly found that the 6,000 Red Signal Crayfish that LAPS were catching annually were the tip of the iceberg. With 'D' traps and a lot of effort, over 100,000 crayfish of all shapes and sizes were removed from a short stretch of The Lark in just 2 months.

Subsequent project development has significantly increased the number of crayfish that we are able to remove during the main season (April to September) whilst improvements in trap design and methodology will allow us to further target smaller individuals and females (especially those carrying eggs – known as 'berried') in the future.

**But** in order to remove the number of crayfish necessary we need a market for them. A lively interest in alien crayfish exists and is, at the moment, being serviced by mostly unlicensed and unregulated individuals. Many trappers are exporting crayfish to Spain and other European countries whilst others supply locally or sell their 'wildcatch' to fishmarkets. At the same time UK food suppliers & distributors buy crayfish in from Denmark and China.

### GLOBAL CRAYFISH MADNESS

The issue here might lie with some trappers approach to their 'product'. In order to ensure a continued supply of their product I fear that the regulations regarding "not returning alien crayfish to the water once caught" may be being ignored and small ones are being put back. Even more damaging is the 'seeding' of new areas with alien crayfish. A bad situation may be getting rapidly worse.

However, there is hope...Presenting

**“eat2beat”**

**A Social Enterprise based the premise that if you eat it you can beat it!**

*We have just completed our first year’s trial of this business with great success. Funds from the enterprise are supporting the expenses of a team of International MBA students based at Lancaster University who are writing the business plan for this endeavor.*

**Our goal is to provide high quality ethically harvested food items. Starting with crayfish and moving swiftly onto Muntjac, Canada geese etc... the possibilities are endless.**

Crayfish are high in protein, low in fat and very tasty. In line with ever increasing interest in healthy eating, putting people in touch with nature for their mental and physical health and real community solutions to environmental problems.

**Long-term large-scale trapping does work!**

We are recording:

- Reduced numbers of crayfish being caught in heavily trapped areas
- The overall size of the individuals is decreasing (these individuals will be more vulnerable to predation and we are improving trap designs and techniques constantly to increase the capture of smaller crayfish – see box...)
- In intensively trapped areas fish fry have been seen for the first time in years. So overall biodiversity is improving in heavily trapped areas

But once an initiative to regulate the ‘crayfish industry’ has really taken hold (such as eat2beat) and numbers are below what is seen to be commercially trappable, we will need the best efforts of our local communities to continue to keep the pressure on. If we can keep up our large-scale trapping efforts on the River Lark we estimate that community trapping will need to take up the gauntlet in 3-5years.

The question is will the conservation movement be ready to change its approach?

***The Brecks Partnership is funded by Norfolk and Suffolk County Councils, Breckland Council, Forest Heath District Council, Borough Council of King’s Lynn and West Norfolk and St.Edmundsbury Borough Council. Project work is funded by partner organisations.***

Abigail Stancliffe-Vaughan  
Community and Biodiversity Project Officer, Brecks Partnership  
[Brecks.project@et.suffolkcc.gov.uk](mailto:Brecks.project@et.suffolkcc.gov.uk) 01842 761569 / 07979 4372  
[www.brecks.org](http://www.brecks.org)

### **Alien Crayfish - Why they are so bad**

Over 87% of our river catchments contain the alien Red Signal Crayfish, *Pacifastacus leniusculus* (Scott Wilson Resource consultants, Peay 2001) and our native crayfish has only 30 years left before becoming extinct according to Holdich et al ... and that was in 1997.

Alien Red signal crayfish are out-competing our native White-clawed crayfish as they are:

- They are more aggressive (with much larger claws)
- larger in size and faster growing
- more fertile than our native crayfish with females producing between 100 and 200 eggs per year
- capable of mating with our native females who then produce sterile offspring, further reducing the number of natives
- they eat our native crayfish and competitively mate with the females!

they carry crayfish plague which kills white-clawed crayfish