



Action for the River Kennet

## Position Statement on American Signal Crayfish

### Background

American Signal crayfish were deliberately introduced to the UK in the 1970's to be farmed as a food source. They rapidly escaped or were released with devastating consequences for our native white clawed crayfish in UK rivers.

Signal crayfish carry a disease known as crayfish plague, which is 100% lethal to the native white-clawed.

Even signal crayfish free of the disease tend to outcompete their native counterparts over time. Studies show that invasive American Signal Crayfish impact every level of the ecosystem in rivers, from river bed algae to the apex predators. Their impact is huge and this is a salutary lesson in well intentioned schemes having unintended consequences.

### ARK's experience

In the Kennet and Pang catchments there are no longer any native white clawed crayfish to our knowledge, but American Signal Crayfish are ubiquitous. They cause serious bank erosion by burrowing into banks and are voracious eaters. Their impact is particularly problematic for coarse fish which lay eggs in summer when crayfish are most active. American Signal Crayfish also eat invertebrate larva, small fish and each other.

We see ample evidence of otters eating crayfish and this seems to have become a major part of their diet, which is positive and probably relieves pressure on fish stocks.

ARK ran an informal experiment of concerted trapping in a short stretch of river in 2008 and found that although trapping gradually reduced the size of individual crayfish the overall volume remained more or less the same, there appeared to be a temporary dip in population which recovered after a year. There have been no successful crayfish eradications by trapping.

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Sam Mashall, Rob Starr, David Hill, John Lawson, Judy Pitts  
Charlotte Hitchmough

A study in 2020<sup>1</sup> confirms that:

1. trapping is ineffective for crayfish population control.
2. less than 2.5% of all the signal crayfish recorded were large enough to be caught in conventional traps.
3. this species reaches breeding age before they're "trappable" size, so populations can still reproduce and proliferate despite best efforts to trap them.
4. large signal crayfish have been shown to cannibalise and eat small crayfish, so removing these larger cannibals with traps could inadvertently allow the population to expand.

### **ARK's view**

In the Kennet the white clawed crayfish appears now to be extinct.

Trapping American Signal Crayfish won't remove them from the ecosystem and may inadvertently cause a population boom.

Traps pose a risk to local wildlife, particularly water vole

A commercial trapping business will only take the larger crayfish, which represent only a few percent of the total population.

Letting the population stabilise naturally is probably most effective approach.

We are not opposed to commercial trapping, but are concerned at the risk presented by well meaning members of the public setting their own traps.

We don't support statements that crayfish trapping will bring ecological benefit.

Charlotte Hitchmough 12.07.24

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<sup>1</sup> ( A novel 'triple drawdown' method highlights deficiencies in invasive alien crayfish survey and control techniques

Daniel D. A. Chadwick, Eleri G. Pritchard, Paul Bradley, Carl D. Sayer, Michael A. Chadwick, Lawrence J. B. Eagle, Jan C. Axmacher

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