

Northumberland launches strategy to protect white-clawed crayfish

On Friday September 27th the banks of the River Wansbeck in Northumberland played host to the launch of a strategy that aims to help protect one of the region's best loved resident species.

The Northumberland Crayfish Conservation Steering Group has unveiled a new 'Crayfish Area Conservation Strategy' on the grounds of Meldon Park in Northumberland.

The strategy was developed by the Northumberland Catchment Partnership and will be delivered by the Northumberland Crayfish Conservation Steering Group. This group is made up of the following partnership organisations: the Environment Agency, Northumberland Rivers Trust, National Trust, Northumberland Wildlife Trust, Natural England, Northumbrian Water Group, Northumberland County Council, Tyne Rivers Trust, and Northumberland National Park Authority.

Northumberland is incredibly lucky to have some of the best populations of white-clawed crayfish in the country. This is the only species of freshwater crayfish native to the UK.

The species provides food for otters, fish and herons whilst also being responsible for helping to break down leaf litter and plant growth.

However, the species is at risk of being lost from the region and the strategy looks to help conserve one of the most threatened species in the UK.

The two-page strategy lays out a framework that will hopefully ensure the freshwater crayfish stays a resident in the region for years to come. The strategy aims to improve our knowledge and better understand of the current distribution and status of freshwater crayfish in Northumberland, and improve our understanding of threats to the remaining populations, agree priorities and take appropriate actions.

Ian Marshall, Water, Biodiversity Technical Specialist, Environment Agency, said:

The Environment Agency is the lead national organisation for the white-clawed crayfish and we fully support the aims and objectives of the Northumberland Crayfish Partnership.

Their main threat is the spread of non-native crayfish species, which out compete our white-clawed crayfish and an aquatic mould carried by these invasive species named crayfish plague. Although it is harmless to humans, it causes 100% mortality in our native crayfish populations. We can prevent its spread by not moving crayfish around, as well as, properly checking, cleaning and drying

equipment such as wellingtons, nets, boats or other equipment.

We would advise everyone who is enjoying our environment to ensure they follow the important check, clean and dry advice as biodiversity is a critical factor in helping to protect the white-clawed crayfish.

In 2019, we have made significant steps to work with the Northumberland Crayfish Partnership, and the Environment Agency looks forward to working closely over the coming years and to undertake the practical conservation actions that will help preserve the habitat of white-clawed crayfish throughout the region.

The Crayfish Area Conservation Strategy work will include carrying out surveys for the species to spot population changes and get an up to date picture of where different crayfish species are residing, identifying potential river or pond habitat improvements and developing safe havens where crayfish can be moved to ensure the species survives into the future.

The strategy launch on the banks of the River Wansbeck will provide an excellent opportunity for people to handle the white-clawed crayfish and experience its ideal habitat.

John Hogger of The Northumberland Crayfish Conservation Steering Group, said:

In Northumberland we are incredibly lucky to have some of the best populations of white-clawed crayfish in the country. It is a legally protected species which lives under rocks and amongst tree roots in rivers, lakes and ponds.

Unfortunately, due to the introduction of crayfish from other countries around the world the species is now endangered and requires a significant amount of help to ensure the remaining populations survive.

The partnership includes a wide variety of organisations including conservation charities, non-governmental organisations, landowners and river users collaborating to identify risks and opportunities to make sure this endangered species is valued and protected.

In the future we will also be working hard to raise awareness of white-clawed crayfish in Northumberland, through engagement with schools and communities where the species is present so that together we can help preserve this incredibly rare species for the benefit of our rivers and for future generations.