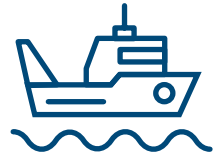


# Codes of Practice for the Welfare of Crabs, Lobsters, Crawfish and Nephrops



## 1. Catching Sector

JUNE 2024





## Overview of the Codes

This “Code of Practice” is part of a suite of codes that provide guidance on best practice handling and dispatch of live crustacea across the supply chain – from boat to plate. There are five individual codes which are summarised here.

[Follow this link](#) to access the other codes.



**Guide 1:  
CATCHING SECTOR**



**Guide 2:  
WHOLESALE AND TRANSPORT SECTOR**



**Guide 3:  
PROCESSING SECTOR**



**Guide 4:  
RETAIL SECTOR**



**Guide 5:  
FOOD SERVICE SECTOR**





# CATCHING SECTOR

## Aim of the Codes of Practice

These codes describe best practice for the handling and dispatch of large decapod crustaceans, i.e. crabs, lobsters and crawfish (European spiny lobster, *Palinurus elephas*) as well as nephrops for the live market. This section also applies to the commercial trade in live-landed brown shrimp (*Crangon crangon*). Many businesses are already implementing measures to ensure good standards of welfare. These codes are intended to guide all businesses to meet industry best-practice and to achieve continuous improvement in crustacean welfare.

This section of the codes describes best practice for the catching sector, from the moment that crustaceans are brought onto the fishing vessel. Further sections describe best practice for the wholesale, transport, processing and retail and food service sectors.

The codes have been written for the UK shellfish industry and supply chain and may not be applicable to all species imported from abroad, depending on their usual habitat and physiology.

## What is welfare?

The Animal Welfare (Sentience) Act 2022 recognises in law that decapod crustaceans are sentient beings and that the ways in which we treat them may have an adverse effect on their welfare.

Research has shown that large decapod crustaceans are sentient. This means that they could be able to 'feel' things including

pain, suffering and distress. If we do things to cause pain, suffering or distress then we say that this is bad for the animal's welfare. If we do things that prevent these feelings then we say that this is good for the animal's welfare.

We have a direct impact on the welfare of crabs, lobsters, crawfish, nephrops and brown shrimp by the way we handle them, the conditions in which we keep them, and the way in which we dispatch them.

## Who is responsible?

Everyone involved in catching, transporting, processing, preparing and selling shellfish has a role to play in ensuring the best welfare for crabs, lobsters, crawfish and nephrops. Whatever you do in the shellfish industry, you have a responsibility for the welfare of crabs, lobsters, crawfish and nephrops for the whole time that they are under your control and you are responsible for complying with all relevant legislation.

Businesses are encouraged to nominate a senior manager or controller to have oversight of the application of the codes in day-to-day operations and to put in place the appropriate plans, policies, training and monitoring to ensure good crustacean welfare across their supply chain.



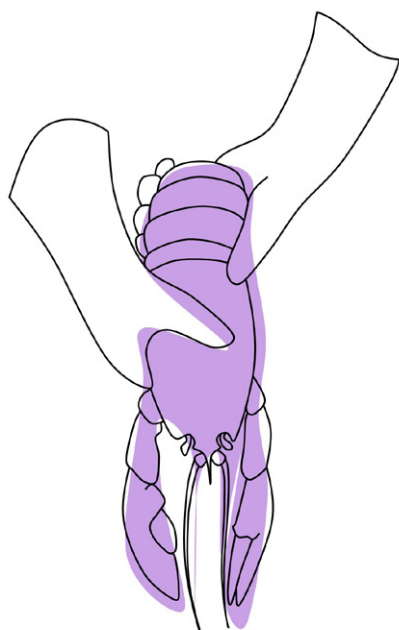


## CATCHING SECTOR - HANDLING

### 1. Handle with care and respect

*Every time that you handle decapod crustaceans you create a risk of causing them physiological stress or physical injury. This has clear welfare consequences.*

- 1.1 You should aim to minimise any handling of crustaceans, working as quickly and as gently as possible.
- 1.2 You should hold crustaceans by the carapace. You should avoid holding them by the legs or claws



- 1.3 The correct handling techniques should be demonstrated to anybody that handles crustaceans.
- 1.4 You should take care when removing crustaceans from pots or nets so that claws and legs that are caught in mesh are not removed or damaged.
- 1.5 You should return unwanted catch to the sea as carefully as possible to minimise the potential for injury and to give them the greatest chance of survival [see information box on returns].

### How do you know that you are doing the right things?

Your crew has been shown how to handle decapod crustaceans and you check this regularly.

You are landing only very low numbers of dead or injured animals.

You review your performance, you identify where improvements could be made, and you set targets for achieving these.

### How can you show that you are doing the right things?

You can record and monitor the percentage of the crustaceans that you land which are damaged by handling.

Positive feedback from your buyers on the health of your catch including the percentage mortality after landing and the percentage of damaged crustaceans.

### Returns

It is important to return any unwanted catch to the sea as carefully as possible, to avoid physical injury and give the best chance for this catch to survive. Unwanted catch may include soft-shelled crabs and lobsters, diseased, damaged or undersized individuals, and v-notched lobsters.

When returning these shellfish to the sea, either over the side of the vessel or down a return shoot, you should reduce distance of fall before entry into the water. Where possible, shellfish should be returned close to their point of capture or to a similar habitat.



## 2. Return soft-shelled and damaged or lethargic crabs and lobsters

*Soft shelled, damaged or lethargic crabs and lobsters are less likely to survive and any mortality will lead to contamination and a lower survival rate of the catch overall, with clear welfare consequences.*

- 2.1 Crew should be able to identify soft shelled crabs without damaging them [see information box on identifying soft shelled crabs].
- 2.2 You should return (discard) soft shelled crabs and lobsters, and crabs and lobsters that are damaged or lethargic.

### How do you know that you are doing the right things?

Your crew has been shown how to check for soft-shelled, damaged or lethargic crabs and lobsters.

You are treating with care the soft-shelled, damaged or lethargic crabs and lobsters that you return.

You are landing no soft-shelled and only very low numbers of damaged or lethargic crabs and lobsters.

You review your performance, you identify where improvements could be made, and you set targets for achieving these.

### How can you show that you are doing the right things?

You can record and monitor the percentage of the crustaceans that you land which are soft-shelled, damaged or lethargic.

Positive feedback from your buyers on the health of your catch including the percentage mortality after landing and the percentages that are soft-shelled, damaged or lethargic.

#### Identifying soft-shelled crabs

The traditional way of working out if a crab is soft-shelled is to apply pressure to the underside of the carapace and feel if the shell can be pushed inwards, which itself can cause injury to the animal. To avoid doing this, there are a number of other indications of a soft-shell:

- Soft shelled crab are noticeably lighter in weight than hard shelled crab of the same size, because they have yet to grow and develop muscle under the new shell.
- Soft shelled crabs tend to be much whiter on the underside of the shell compared to older-shelled crabs, which are usually a darker yellowish-brown colour.
- Other good indications include the presence of sharp, unworn walking legs and the absence of any barnacles and sponges growing on the shell.

Remember to return any unwanted catch to the sea as carefully as possible, to avoid physical injury and give the best chance for this catch to survive.



### 3. Avoid physical impacts and crushing

*Even though they have hard shells, decapod crustaceans can suffer internal and external injury and physiological stress by physical impacts (such as dropping) and by crushing. These injuries are a clear welfare issue and can lead to greater mortality.*

- 3.1 Crustaceans should not be thrown or dropped into containers but should be placed carefully into them.
- 3.2 Containers and boxes of crustaceans should not be dropped or thrown.
- 3.3 You should avoid stacking of containers of crustaceans in a way that risks crushing the animals in the lower containers.
- 3.4 Containers should not be so large that the weight of the catch risks crushing the crustaceans at the bottom.

#### **How do you know that you are doing the right things?**

Your crew has been shown how to avoid injuring crustaceans.

You are landing only very low numbers of injured or crushed animals.

You review your performance, you identify where improvements could be made, and you set targets for achieving these.

#### **How can you show that you are doing the right things?**

You can record and monitor the percentage of the crustaceans that you land which are injured or crushed.

Positive feedback from your buyers on the health of your catch including the percentage that is rejected for being injured or crushed.





## CATCHING SECTOR - PROCEDURES

### 4. Reduce and refine invasive procedures

*Nicking stops brown crabs from using their claws to injure each other and may be required by buyers to reduce damage and mortality in live export sales. However, nicking could also cause pain, suffering or distress.*

- 4.1 You should only nick crabs if you know that they will be stored in vivier tanks for prolonged periods.
- 4.2 When nicking, it is good practice to use a block to ease the claw open and to sever the tendon in the hinge of the claw by applying a blade across the tendon, also known as a French nick, and to return crabs to salt water as quickly as possible.
- 4.3 The correct nicking techniques should be demonstrated to anybody that is undertaking this task.
- 4.4 You should avoid declawing live crabs and lobsters.

#### How do you know that you are doing the right things?

Your crew have been shown how to nick using the correct equipment and techniques.

You are not declawing crabs or lobsters.

You review your performance, you identify where improvements could be made, and you set targets for achieving these.

#### How can you show that you are doing the right things?

Positive feedback from your buyers on the low percentage of the crustaceans that you supply which are poorly nicked.

#### Research into nicking crabs

Nicking of brown crabs involves cutting the tendon in the claw and is done to prevent damage between crabs after capture. Nicking results in an open wound, increasing susceptibility to infection. It also damages internal claw tissue leading to necrosis (death to body tissue), causes haemolymph (fluid equivalent to blood in invertebrates) loss, and compromises defence mechanisms. Nicked crabs have also been shown to have elevated levels of immune response (e.g. white blood cells) and stress indicators (e.g. glucose and lactate) and an increased stress response. These impacts all weaken the crab and reduce its chance of survival. Research has demonstrated a correlation between nicking and an increase in subsequent mortality and studies have also demonstrated that nicking can reduce the quality of the claw muscle.





### **Alternatives to nicking crabs**

Whilst lobsters can be banded to prevent them damaging each other, this technique is not effective with brown crabs because of the shape of their claws. The development of alternative techniques that allow for the rapid and effective restraint of brown crabs' claws could remove the need for nicking. For example, the practice of banding with a small block or dowel in the crab's claws has been trialled in other species. However, there are no alternative techniques for brown crabs available at this time and further research into this area is needed.

### **V-notching of lobsters**

V-notching is a widely employed stock conservation measure for lobsters. A V-notch is made by removing a small piece from one or more of the tail sections of a lobster. In the UK it is illegal to land V-notched lobsters, allowing them additional time for reproduction.

Steps can be taken to minimise any risks to welfare when V-notching. You should aim to minimise handling and use a clean, sharp tool specifically designed for the purpose to ensure the notch is of the right depth.





## CATCHING SECTOR - ENVIRONMENT AND STORAGE

### 5. Create the best environment for health and welfare

*Gills cannot function properly out of water. Temperature, air flow, humidity, vibration and light can all affect crustacean welfare.*

- 5.1 You should protect crustaceans from exposure to rain, snow, temperatures below freezing, wind, sun, light, heat, and vibration.
- 5.2 Crustaceans should be stored in the dark or with only such dim lighting (ideally red) as needed for crew safety.
- 5.3 You should aim to prevent crustaceans' gills from drying out [see information box on indicators of stress and physiological challenge].
- 5.4 You should store species separately.

### How do you know that you are doing the right things?

You have made sure that your processes minimise crustaceans' exposure to adverse conditions.

You are landing only very low numbers of dead/dying animals.

-You review your performance, you identify where improvements could be made, and you set targets for achieving these.

### How can you show that you are doing the right things?

You can record and monitor the percentage of the crustaceans that you land which are dead or dying.

Positive feedback from your buyers on the health of your catch including the percentage mortality and indications of stress and physiological challenge after landing.

### Indicators of stress and physiological challenge

When storing shellfish it is important to recognise indicators of stress and physiological challenge, which are signs of poor welfare. These include:

- Distended membranes between the tail and carapace and at leg joints.
- A reflex separation of one or more limbs (autotomy).
- Rapid tail thrashing (an escape mechanism) in lobsters.
- A lack of limb movement.
- No reaction when limbs are moved.
- No reaction when mouth parts touched.
- No attempt to move or turn over when placed on their sides.

Where indicators are being used to assess welfare, then the proportion of dead animals can also be used as a measure of overall physiological challenge.



## 5A Dry storage

- 5.5 When stored dry you should make sure that crabs, lobsters and crawfish are oriented correctly (i.e., that they are the right way up, with their legs underneath them) when placing them into a box or container.
- 5.6 You should pack crabs that have not been nicked close together, the right way up, with their claws and legs underneath them.
- 5.7 It is best practice to store nephrops for the live market in individual tubes.

### Dry storage

As a short-term measure (e.g. whilst sorting catch) and for vessels operating without vivier tanks, dry-stored crabs and lobster should be covered with a piece of wet fabric, newspaper or hessian, and should be regularly re-wetted. Storing shellfish the right way up will reduce the evaporation of water from their bodies. Consideration should be given to how cooling can be maintained.

## 5B Storage in keep pots/nets/tubes

- 5.8 You should locate keep pots/nets/tubes for storage at sea away from freshwater outlets and possible pollution sources.
- 5.9 You should position keep pots/nets/tubes for storage at sea to avoid periodic drying and any strong tidal forces or physical impacts that could injure crustaceans.

- 5.10 You should position keep pots/nets/tubes for storage at sea to avoid significant daily temperature fluctuations (e.g. if near the surface) and risk of silting (e.g. if on the sea bed).
- 5.11 Keep pots/nets/tubes should be designed to avoid injuries to crustaceans.
- 5.12 You should inspect keep pots/nets/tubes on a regular basis to monitor health and remove any mortalities.
- 5.13 You should avoid over-stocking keep pots/nets to reduce the risk of animals injuring each other.

### How do you know that you are doing the right things?

You have made sure to design and place your keep pots/nets/tubes to avoid adverse conditions.

You inspect your keep pots/nets/tubes regularly.

You are landing only very low numbers of injured, dead or dying crustaceans.

You review your performance, you identify where improvements could be made, and you set targets for achieving these.

### How can you show that you are doing the right things?

You can record and monitor the percentage of the crustaceans that you land which are injured, dead or dying.

Positive feedback from your buyers on the health of your catch including the percentage mortality and indications of stress and physiological challenge after landing.



## 5C Storage in vivier tanks

- 5.14 It is best practice to store crustaceans in vivier tanks.
- 5.15 You should keep vivier tanks clean and ensure an adequate flow of clean seawater to maintain water quality [see information box on vivier storage].
- 5.16 You should avoid seawater intake close to freshwater outlets, especially after periods of heavy rain.

### How do you know that you are doing the right things?

You have made sure that your processes and equipment provide an adequate flow of clean seawater to maintain water quality.

You are landing only very low numbers of dead or dying animals.

You review your performance, you identify where improvements could be made, and you set targets for achieving these.

### How can you show that you are doing the right things?

Positive feedback from your buyers on the health of your catch including the percentage mortality and indications of stress and physiological challenge after landing.

#### Transferring from dry storage to vivier tanks

Dry storage will lead to a build-up of waste products in crabs and lobsters. If transferred to a vivier tank there will be an increased amount of these waste products introduced to the system, which will impact on water quality. There will also be an increased demand for oxygen as the shellfish try to remove those waste products from their system. Flow rates and oxygenation may require adjusting to compensate for these changes.







## Vivier Storage

In-water storage is used throughout the shellfish supply chain: on vessels, in on-shore storage and display, and in transport. The same welfare and environmental criteria apply across all of these, although the way in which they are achieved may differ.

**Oxygen:** Although shellfish can survive for short periods with reduced oxygen levels these conditions result in waste products accumulating in the body which crabs, lobsters and nephrops find aversive. Oxygen saturation should ideally not fall below 85%. In closed systems, aerate from the bottom of the tank and use a diffuser to generate small bubbles which increase oxygen transfer. Note that aeration, particularly from a compressor or on a hot day, can increase water temperature and consideration should be given to cooling air if needed.

**Temperature:** Shellfish cannot control their internal temperature so need to be protected both from extreme temperatures and rapid changes in temperature. Cool shellfish use less energy, require less feeding and are less likely to fight with others or moult. Target temperature for storing and transporting crabs, lobsters, crawfish and nephrops is between 4 and 8°C.

**Light:** Shellfish tend to inhabit low-light environments and are mostly nocturnal. Crabs, lobsters, crawfish and nephrops are averse to high light levels and should be stored in the dark or with only such dim lighting (ideally red) as needed. However, working conditions need to be safe and if required light levels should be increased slowly and minimised to the area required.

**Salinity:** Shellfish live in fully marine waters which, around the UK, are generally between 32-35‰ (part per thousand) salt, equal to 32-35 grams of salt in one litre of water. If using seawater in a vivier tank then make sure that the source is clean and free from any possible pollutants. For example, seawater from within a harbour may be contaminated with oil or other hydrocarbons. Note that evaporation from the vivier tank can increase salinity.

**Noise, vibration, impacts:** Whilst there is 'noise' at sea, storage can lead to increased un-natural and unfamiliar sounds, vibration and impact leading to increased stress. Storage facilities should be designed, where practicable, to minimise the noise and vibration from pumps, motors and compressors.

**Feeding:** Shellfish in vivier tanks at sea should not be fed. This serves to clear the digestive system and purge waste products whilst there is sufficient fresh seawater to do so, prior to overland transport in a vivier lorry where fresh seawater is not available.

**Monitoring:** Any in-water system will require monitoring, maintenance and record keeping to ensure good welfare standards. In closed systems (i.e. not pumping clean, fresh seawater) the following information should be collected and retained for analysis and future reference:

- |                       |  |                                 |
|-----------------------|--|---------------------------------|
| - Oxygen              | - Flow rates   | - Temperature                   |
| - pH                  | - Stocking density   | - Water clarity and cleanliness |
| - Ammonia (ammonium)  | - Mortality & indicators of stress and physiological challenge |                                 |
| - Nitrates (nitrites) |  |                                 |
| - Salinity            |  |                                 |

## Seafish

18 Logie Mill  
Logie Green Road  
Edinburgh  
EH7 4HS

E: [seafish@seafish.co.uk](mailto:seafish@seafish.co.uk)

Version 2 July 2024



Shellfish  
Association of Great Britain

