

# The commercial exploitation of Thames Chinese mitten crabs. Damned if we don't – damned if we do.

11<sup>th</sup> March 2010

A joint meeting of the Natural History Museum and the Linnean Society of London,  
supported by the London Port Health Authority, City of London Corporation

Organised by **Paul Clark** (Natural History Museum)



The invasive Chinese mitten crab *Eriocheir sinensis* is well established in the River Thames, London. It is considered a delicacy in many SE Asian countries and ca.US\$40 can be paid for a single mature female mitten crab in the right condition at high-class restaurants in China, Japan and Singapore. Therefore, commercial exploitation may be a viable method of reducing crab numbers. A recent study concluded that Thames mitten crabs are fit for human consumption and that the population is large enough to be exploited. But do we really want to start a Thames mitten crab fishery?

We are damned if we do and damned if we don't because mitten crabs have few natural enemies capable of dramatically reducing their numbers. If exploitation of mitten crabs does not proceed, the population will continue to increase and expand its distribution westward. Density of mitten crab burrows already recorded in unprotected river banks will proliferate, causing more erosion. Furthermore, larval densities will continue to rise in the estuarine plankton, increasing the risk of uptake into ballast water for dispersal into new watersheds, nationally by local coastal shipping and to new continents via trans-oceanic vessels.

If commercial exploitation is regarded as a suitable method by which to reduce Thames crab numbers, then another set of environmental issues needs to be addressed. For example, the European Commission has initiated an Eel Recovery Plan in an attempt to return the European eel stock to more sustainable levels. But, during the recent pilot fisheries study using fyke nets, the eel proved to be a significant part of the by-catch. Consequently, commercial exploitation of mitten crabs could be at the detriment of the Thames eel population. Moreover, if the Thames mitten crab fishery were to be a financial success, there is real concern that this contentious immigrant could be intentionally dispersed throughout other UK watersheds, as is the case for the invasive freshwater crayfish, in order to cash in on a perceived market. Furthermore, a mitten crab fishery would require strict controls with respect to fishing equipment, fishermen, traders and restaurants including the possible banning of live imports of *Eriocheir sinensis* into the UK.

## Programme

09.30 Arrival and registration

09.55 Welcome

10.00 Introduction

*Paul Clark, Department of Zoology, The Natural History Museum*

10.25 Invasive crayfish – a sorry tale

*David Holdich, Crayfish Survey & Research, Peak Ecology Ltd*

10.50 Global spread of *Eriocheir sinensis*

*Matt Bentley, School of Marine Science & Technology, Newcastle University*

11.15 Lung fluke in Thames mitten crabs

*Grant Stentiford, European Community Reference Laboratory for Crustacean Diseases*

11.40 Tea

12.00 *Vibrio parahaemolyticus* in Thames mitten crabs

*Sariqa Wagley, School of Biosciences, University of Exeter*

12.25 Contaminants in Thames mitten crabs

*Phil Rainbow, Department of Zoology, The Natural History Museum*

12.50 Entrainment of mitten crabs

*Hayley Stanton Murch et al, School of Biological Sciences, Royal Holloway*

13.15 Lunch

14.00 Commercial exploitation of Thames mitten crabs: damned if we don't – damned if we do

*Paul Clark, Natural History Museum*

14.25 Exploitation of Dutch mitten crabs

*Martin de Graaf, Fisheries Department, Institute for Marine Resources and Ecosystem Studies*

14.50 Legislation: Queensbury rules or gloves off?

*Heidi Stone, Fisheries Policy Manager, Environment Agency*

15.15 Tea

15.35 The GB invasive non-native species policy framework

*Simon Mackown, Non-native species policy, DEFRA*

16.00 Concluding remarks/discussion

**For registration please visit [www.linnean.org](http://www.linnean.org) and visit our upcoming events page to download your registration form.**

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