

project news

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ACRUNET - What's It All About?

The distribution of brown crab spans the entire Atlantic Area. While the catching sector is concentrated mainly in the UK, Ireland and France, both Portugal and Spain play a huge role in the distribution and buying of brown crab once it is landed. Processing and value adding activities are spread across the whole region. In 2008 all operators in this industry were seriously worried: prices were, at best, static; demand was sluggish; non-EU imports of similar seafood were much cheaper; and fuel prices were soaring.

The Atlantic Crab Resource Users Network (ACRUNET) grew from a meeting held in Edinburgh in September 2008 called by the Scottish-based Crab & Lobster Commercial Strategy Group. This group was very concerned that the expanding fleets, particularly in Ireland and Scotland, were largely responsible for the poor market conditions and the situation could only get worse. Whereas this analysis was correct, to a certain extent, the expanded group which eventually encompassed Scotland, the North Sea and Channel coasts of England, Wales, Ireland (UK&ROI Transnational Crab Group) and France, soon realised that their shared issues far out-weighed their differences.

It was obvious that a transnational approach to these issues, addressed through dialogue and co-operation, was far more likely to succeed than continued negative non-productive under-cutting competition. A basic problem was the landing of too much product in the form of live brown crab which had to be sold quickly – and cheaply! This issue could only be addressed by the various parties communicating and agreeing to match



supply to demand. Finally, at a seminal meeting held in Paris in January 2010, the group agreed a strategy to take the brown crab industry forward: match supply with demand, particularly in spring and early summer; improve management of fisheries at national level and run a significant marketing campaign to increase consumption Europe-wide, particularly in the traditional markets such as France.

The marketing campaign would be the keystone of the initiative, but marketing involves serious financial input which the voluntary ad hoc group was not in a position to provide.

Similarly, it is very difficult to get funding for a purely marketing-based proposal but in this case the existing network could demonstrate the legitimate need for an integrated root and branch analysis of the brown crab industry from catcher to consumer to include all aspects of the route to market, costs, new product format and, most importantly, promotion.

Using the existing industry network and incorporating further relevant agencies, a proposal was submitted to INTERREG under its Atlantic Area Priority 1 (Promote transnational entrepreneurial and innovation networks), Objective 2 (Enhance competitiveness and innovation capacities in maritime economy niches of excellence) Programme. The proposal was successful and ACRUNET was approved to run from July 2012 to end of June 2015.



ACRUNET's official launch in Clontarf Castle, Dublin, October 2012.

ACRUNET Gets Going

At its initial preparatory meeting held at Bewley's Hotel, Dublin Airport, in June 2012, ACRUNET emerged as a truly stakeholder, bottom-up, industry-driven project with an ambitious programme of practical and relevant activities planned for the coming three years. This meeting of the participating organisations was called to finalise the partnership list, explore options on how to integrate the remarkable list of "to dos" and provide an opportunity for the partners to become acquainted with each other, their roles, their skills and their individual vision for the future of the brown crab industry. The "kick-off" meeting took place following the official launch of ACRUNET by Kieran Calnan, Chairman of

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the lead partner Bord Iascaigh Mhara (BIM), at a two-day meeting in Clontarf Castle, Dublin on 10-11 October 2012 where the partners defined their roles and projected work programme. Following the meeting a spokesperson for the project described ACRUNET as: "probably the most important development in the brown crab industry both for European crab fishermen and its ancillary industries," and went on to say, "This project is unique and innovative because it has been driven by the fishing industry itself and, as such, has a better than average chance of long-term success. The crabbing sector is aware of the dangers posed by a rapidly changing market place and the threats of cheaper products worldwide and believes in confronting these challenges with this ambitious range of activities which will ensure good scientific advice, internationally-recognised standards and an efficient, economic route to market".

Hosted by the Shellfish Association of Great Britain (SAGB), Fishmonger's Hall in London provided an iconic backdrop to the next ACRUNET meeting held in February 2013. Following the meeting, Jerry Percy, Chairman of the Crustacean Committee, SAGB, said: "It is not often that one gets a coming together of such a diverse group that results not only in open and honest conversation but also with the outcome of an agreed focus on a clear road map for future work, based on mutual understanding and agreement."

Currently, the industry-based partners have either completed, or are in the process of carrying out extensive consultation initiatives with their members around the coast. The results of these consultations will have a significant effect on the tone of the ACRUNET project going forward and will constitute an important part of the next scheduled partner meeting to be hosted by FranceAgriMer in Paris at the end of May 2013.

Overview of the End-point of Transport and Distribution for Brown Crab

The brown crab (*Cancer pagurus*) is particularly abundant in coastal waters of northwest Europe, particularly off the coasts of Norway, Scotland, England and Brittany, France. In these countries captures have increased from 10,000 tons after the Second World War to nearly 40,000 in 2010 (valued approximately at €66 million at the first point of sale). The brown crab is mainly exported to Mediterranean countries, like France, Spain, Portugal and Italy, where they are widely appreciated, and are mostly sold live.

Activity 6 of the ACRUNET project, led by Dr António Marques of the Instituto Português do Mar e da Atmosfera (IPMA) in Portugal, will address the problem of bulk transport of live brown crab and its storage at reception facilities. This activity is focused on exploring feasible commercial solutions for international dry transport developed by the University of Hull compared with the current vivier transport. Both systems will be monitored in existing transport chains to France, Spain and Portugal from Scotland and Ireland. A feasibility demonstration will then be performed, in combination with stakeholders in each country, for both transport and storage systems to ensure high-quality crabs using physical criteria. Additionally, best practice guidelines for high quality brown crab transport will be created. One workshop will also be organised for the stakeholders in each country targeting the optimisation of resources during live transport.

This market is dependent on a complex logistics-based transport of long duration, with holding facilities adapted for stocking large quantities of crustacean species from different geographical locations (Figure 1). Live transport of *C. pagurus* is commonly used to satisfy demand and to maximise returns from the fishery, but the journey to the end of the marketing chain is usually long (~2 to 3 days) and involves several post-harvest operations (e.g. nicking, transport in water without filtration at high densities and temperatures, careless unloading process) (Figure 2). Such stressors have been associated with losses attributable to heavy mortality during transport (1-50 %) and recovery at importers' premises

(15-70%). Such waste represent more than 10% economic loss to those involved in the trade and contribute to unsustainable exploitation of brown crab.

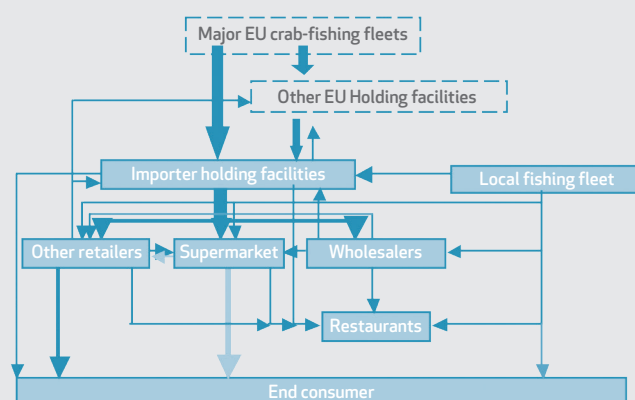


Figure 1. Schematic representation of the live crustacean trade chain in Portugal. Arrows represent the trade route between the entities, their width being greater for routes with higher trade importance. Dashed lines represent the foreign trade chain.



Figure 2. Some post-harvest brown crab operations that affect crab quality during transport (upper pictures) and storage at holding facilities (lower pictures) (pictures from Sara Barrento).

Major Endorsement of ACRUNET by the Channel Crabbers

At the 34th annual Mid-Channel Potting Conference, held this year in St Malo, France, the Comité National des Pêches Maritimes et des Elevages Marins (CNPMEM) provided the delegates with a progress report on ACRUNET. The ensuing debate concluded with a motion on the joint management of crustacean fishing effort in the Channel which emphasised the importance of regulation of the overall fishing effort to ensure future sustainability both for the resource and the market.

The motion "wished that the ACRUNET programme should address the current situation in the fishing effort deployed by the different fleets in fishing brown crab, and the efficiency of the existing regulations that limit this effort" and "emphasised that the professional organisations concerned were eager to get involved in implementing

adequate management measures at a regional and/or national level, particularly in view of the ACRUNET programme results".

M. Daniel Lefevre, President of the Normandy Regional Fishermen Association, chaired the Working Group 3 (Channel) meeting at the recent North Western Waters Regional Advisory Council (NWWAC) assembly in Bilbao, Spain, which included a project update by Norah Parke, Network Coordinator for ACRUNET. M. Lefevre referred to the motion from the Mid-Channel Potting Conference during the ensuing discussion and stressed the importance for all jurisdictions to support the fishing organisations and ACRUNET in its attempts to bring about the regulation of the crustacean fishing effort.

The French Market for Brown Crab: A Declining Situation

With an estimated 6,800 tons caught in 2011, France is the third largest producer of brown crab in the world. However, it is still contributing less than 15% of total production. The resource is apparently healthy and the annual production of brown crab in France has been stable for more than 15 years, varying between 6,000 and 7,000 tons. To supply the market, 30 French vessels specifically target brown crab during the traditional fishing season (i.e. the second half of the year, roughly July to December). The main fleet consists of 12 offshore exclusive potters but a large number of vessels catch brown crab as by catch.

To meet home demand, France is reliant on imports totalling around 10,000 tons (equivalent live weight) of fresh and frozen brown crab, largely supplied by the two main producing countries, Ireland and United Kingdom, but volumes have been steadily decreasing over in recent years. In parallel, France is exporting around 1,500 tons (equivalent live weight) mainly to its historical clients, i.e. Italy, Portugal and Spain, but is also recently turning to new markets, such as China, as southern Europe is currently going through a major economic crisis.

The French consumer has a preference for whole fresh crab and naturally consumes it during the fishing season, with a peak in December, as crab still represents one of the "must-haves" on a platter of seafood during the holiday season. Nowadays, almost 1 in 10 households will buy brown crab at least once a year for home consumption, in addition to consumption in seafood restaurants. However, during recent years, consumption seems to have slowed down, as consumers' preference moves towards more practical products such as

cooked crab or crab-meat. As with many seafood products, the clientele for brown crab is quite mature and the sector struggles to recruit new consumers, who often do not feel at ease with cooking and shelling it. There is a huge opportunity for ACRUNET to identify and propose solutions to some of the problems facing the marketing of brown crab and we look forward to a resurgence of interest in this excellent seafood with the proposed innovations in transport and product formats.



Traditional pot fishing in France.

An Innovative Crab Recipe Courtesy of Seafood Scotland

Scottish Crab, Roasted Sweetcorn and Gruyère Tart

Ingredients

For 4 people:

50 grams brown crab meat
 100 grams white crab meat
 30 grams spring onion
 60 grams sweetcorn kernels
 1 dash of olive oil
 2 whole eggs
 170 ml milk
 50 grams gruyère cheese
 410mm savoury pastry cases

Directions

- If uncooked, blind bake pastry cases at 185°C for 15 minutes
- Roast sweetcorn in a little olive oil until golden brown
- Coat bottom of pastry cases with the brown crab meat
- Mix the white crab meat, chopped spring onion and roasted sweetcorn together then put on top of the brown crab in the pastry cases
- Whisk the eggs and milk together and season with salt and pepper then pour gently into the pastry cases
- Top with gruyère cheese and bake at 170°C for 20-30 minutes



European Seafood Exposition, Brussels, April 2013

The Brussels Seafood Show gets bigger and better every year, with attendance this year estimated to be nearly 30,000. A highlight of the event is the awarding of the Seafood Prix d'Elite and, apart from the almost surreal entry of Seafood Flavoured Ice Cream, it was heartening to see that a strong contender for first place was a traditional dressed crab with a modern twist – the sort of product which can widen the market for brown crab and appeal to consumers everywhere. Elsewhere, there was evidence of more developments

happening this year, with the Blue Sea Food Company from Devon and Burgons of Eyemouth obviously well on their way to combining their brown crab processing and marketing skills.

Brown crab was in evidence from all the Atlantic Area countries from which ACRUNET is drawn, as one would expect, with a range of product formats from vacuum-packed crab meat to live crab in vivier holding systems. The Seafood Exposition provided an excellent opportunity to promote the ACRUNET project and its planned work programme.



Pat the Cope Gallagher MEP, Fisheries Committee, European Parliament gets an update on the ACRUNET project from the Network Coordinator Norah Parke

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