

## CRAYFISH PREDATION EXPERIMENTS ON THE INTRODUCED ZEBRA MUSSEL, DREISSENA POLYMORPHA, IN IRELAND, AND THEIR POTENTIAL FOR BIOCONTROL.

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The zebra mussel *Dreissena polymorpha*, native to the Aralo-Caspian region, has spread across Europe in the last 180 years. Although it reached England in 1820, it only arrived in Ireland in around 1995, probably attached to the hull of pleasure boats, and since then has spread through the lowland Shannon and Erne systems, which are linked by canal. While White-clawed crayfish *Austropotamobius pallipes* (Lereboullet) occur in these systems, *Dreissena* has not yet colonized sites with large crayfish populations. In laboratory experiments crayfish of both sexes ranging in size from 32-48 mm carapace length (CL) were offered zebra mussels in 7 size classes spanning a range from 3-17 mm total length. Crayfish fed most on small mussels, although there was some correlation between size of crayfish and largest mussels attacked. When eaten mussels were not replaced, crayfish shifted to larger sizes. In the presence of alternative prey, experienced crayfish ate mussels and alternative foods in similar amounts while those who had never encountered zebra mussels nearly always chose the alternative foods first. The possibility of crayfish exerting

significant controlling impacts on expanding mussel populations is discussed.

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