

Why do we boil lobsters alive - and do they feel pain?

From [Sascha Camilli, SpeciesUnite.com](#)

August 2024

Posted on All-Creatures.org: September 2, 2024

Lobsters are not red in their natural state. There are [over 50 species of lobster in the world](#), in an array of hues, most prevalently blue and green. The famous red shade is only [acquired when the animals are boiled](#). And as such, the color should be synonymous with unimaginable suffering rather than Michelin-starred delight.



A common delicacy in restaurants around the world, lobster is known for its bright red color. Depicted on pricey menus and fancy restaurant signs, the scarlet-hued lobster is a symbol of culinary excellence. However, lobsters aren't red in their natural state – there are [over 50 species of lobster in the world](#), in an array of hues, most prevalently blue and green. The famous red shade is only [acquired when the animals are boiled](#). And as such, the color should be synonymous with unimaginable suffering rather than Michelin-starred delight.

In seafood restaurants across the globe, chefs kill lobsters in one of two ways: either slicing them in half or boiling them alive. The latter process is so violent and unpalatable that [chefs sometimes leave the room](#) while the animal is being boiled. It's a common sight for lobsters to frantically scratch at the pot in a desperate attempt to escape. Despite this, the world still has only in part accepted the scientific idea that lobsters, like other crustaceans, do indeed feel pain.

In 2019, [an estimated 37-60 billion](#) farmed crayfish and lobsters were killed around the globe. Lobsters are different from us – and the animals with whom we most frequently communicate, such as cats and dogs – in many ways. But they are also more similar to us than we might think. They also carry their

offspring for nine months, for example. Lobsters can live to be over a hundred years old, take seasonal journeys, and establish social relationships. They use complex signals to explore their surroundings. [Neurobiologist Tom Abrams has said that](#) “lobsters have a full array of senses.”

While it isn't possible to conclusively prove that any individual – human or other animal – feels pain, science shows us that lobsters behave as if they do. Starting with an observation that doesn't require any scientific knowledge, the way the animals claw at the pot when being boiled, in a bid for their lives, is an indication of deep physical discomfort. [Research has also shown](#) that when a decapod crustacean, such as a lobster, is exposed to chemical or excessive pressure, they respond by grooming that area for some time afterward – a behavior that indicates pain in animals, including humans.



But why are lobsters cooked alive? The response lies in the [harmful bacteria](#) that live in the flesh of some sea animals. When the animal dies, these bacteria quickly spread, and aren't always killed by cooking. In order to avoid poisoning the humans eating them, lobsters are thrown into scalding water while still fully conscious – a practice so cruel that it is banned in Switzerland, Norway, and New Zealand, as well as Reggio Emilia, a city in northern Italy.

Being boiled alive is not the only way that lobsters are subjected to extreme agony. Prior to being cooked and eaten, the animals are sometimes shipped internationally, across vast distances. In the UK, an overwhelming majority of lobsters fished are shipped to other territories, sometimes as far as China. The UK also [exports lobsters to Mediterranean countries](#) to a value of £80million annually. During this transit, animals are often packed into boxes and can be [transported in clingfilm](#), which causes them to suffocate. They are commonly kept on ice for hours during transport and upon arrival at restaurants – this is a practice that was [banned in Switzerland and Italy](#), after courts determined that doing so would cause them undue suffering.

Laura Poulson, Campaign Manager for Crustacean Compassion, says: “It is not just the end point of killing these animals that poses welfare risks. They also suffer from being kept alive, on ice, or if in

water, in dirty and crowded tanks with many other animals. They are carried in plastic bags that do little to protect their fragile limbs and can cause suffocation, before being stored in fridges or freezers in consumers' homes – all these practices cause injury, distress and potentially death.”

What Poulson is referring to here is the alarming practice where live lobsters are sold online to untrained consumers to kill at home – even using [postal services](#). Poulson says: “It is possible, and quite common, for people to buy live animals like crabs and lobsters in shops and fishmongers, to take home and kill in their own kitchens, without any proper equipment, knowledge or training on how to do so humanely. Even worse, these poor animals can be bought online and posted to the consumer, through the normal postal services. Many die in transit, or are faced with lengthy journeys in unsuitable conditions, just to arrive at the fate as those bought in store – inhumane and inappropriate handling, storage and slaughter by untrained home cooks.” Selling live lobsters is a practice that continues today, despite the fact that it could be at odds with the legislation in place under The Welfare of Animals at the Time of Killing (WATOK) regulation, which states that “No person may engage in the restraint, stunning or killing of an animal unless that person has the knowledge and skill necessary to perform those operations humanely and efficiently”.



One of the most sought-after species of lobster in the world is the Maine lobster, due to the taste and texture of their flesh, which is due to the cold waters these animals live in. These lobsters have a greenish-brown shade and are mainly caught between June and December. Every year, tens of thousands of people visit the annual Maine Lobster Festival. But despite being considered a delicacy, these animals are often severely mistreated: a [PETA investigation](#) of Linda Bean's Maine Lobster found workers ripping the animals apart while still alive. Years later, [another PETA investigation](#) at Maine Fair Trade Lobster once again found workers dismembering conscious lobsters. Despite the region prides itself on its traditional lobster cuisine, cruelty runs wild through its offering.

If all the abuse that's rampant in the lobster trade weren't enough to put anyone off their dinner, there's also the fact that [overfishing](#) and intense lobster harvesting is killing other animals too – whales and other mammals are commonly caught in lobster nets, which causes an agonizing death. More than 85 percent of the North Atlantic's right whale population [is estimated](#) to have been caught in a net at least once, and 70

right whales have been injured in lobster-fishing equipment since 2017. [Norwegian lobsters are trawled](#), with bycatch that can involve dolphins and turtles. Globally, the industry kills and injures countless animals who will never be consumed and are most commonly thrown back into the water. “The lobsters and fish who are boiled or broiled alive aren’t the only victims of the environmentally disastrous fishing industry,” PETA Founder Ingrid Newkirk has said, also offering a solution: “PETA urges anyone disturbed by the thought of whales dying in lobster gear to choose vegan.”

Taking lobster and other sea animals off the menu is the quickest and most effective action that consumers can take to minimize this suffering and environmental destruction. And it's one of the actions that's actually in our power, as these animals have very little legal protection. In most parts of the world, crustaceans' rights are almost non-existent compared to those of other animals. In the UK, it wasn't until 2022 that [lobsters, crabs, and octopus](#) were recognized as sentient and added to the Animal Welfare (Sentience) Bill. In most parts of the world, keeping them on ice for hours and boiling them alive is still legal and allowed. The differences are also evident if we imagine online retailers selling live pigs or chickens for consumers to slaughter at home. There would be outrage – yet the sale of live lobsters is allowed to continue.

“We don’t expect to buy a live chicken or lamb and take home to kill as, rightly, there are concerns about whether we could kill the animal humanely and without undue suffering. Decapods should be given that same protection.”

— Dr Ben Sturgeon, Crustacean Compassion’s CEO

Crustacean Compassion’s CEO Dr Ben Sturgeon says: “Decapod crustaceans were legally recognised as being able to feel pain, with their inclusion in the Animal Welfare (Sentience) Act, 2022. It is scientifically evident and irrefutable that they can feel pain, so it is morally unjust to allow cruel practices to continue. They must be protected under the Animal Welfare Act 2006 (England and Wales), based on this evidence. We don’t expect to buy a live chicken or lamb and take home to kill as, rightly, there are concerns about whether we could kill the animal humanely and without undue suffering. Decapods should be given that same protection”.

While individual change is needed and necessary, advocates must also work to enable change on a systemic level. Crustacean Compassion encourages everyone who cares about the well-being of decapods to get active to help pass a ban on live lobster sales by signing petitions to call for an end to the sale of live animals. Other actions include getting involved to end live boiling, which there are successful precedents for, with multiple countries implementing bans.

As science continues to draw new conclusions evidencing the sentience of decapods and other marine animals, legislation must catch up – and it's up to activists to make their voices heard.

Will you join Species Unite in calling on Amazon to [prohibit the sale and shipment of live lobsters](#)? These intelligent sentient beings deserve so much more than being packed into styrofoam containers and shipped thousands of miles from their seabed homes.