



Research Article.

Callinectes sapidus in Algeria: Invasive Threat with Bioeconomic Potential for Sustainable Aquaculture

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ABSTRACT

The blue crab *Callinectes sapidus* represents a significant invasive alien species (IAS) in the Mediterranean basin, with first detection in Algeria occurring in 2018 at Z'hor Wadi (Jijel). This study evaluates the dual nature of this invasion: ecological threat and bioeconomic opportunity. Through comprehensive field surveys and experimental trials, we assessed the species' establishment, reproductive success, and potential for sustainable valorization in aquaculture. Results demonstrate rapid population expansion along the Algerian coast from El Tarf to Algiers between 2019-2025, with confirmed reproduction in Mellah Lagoon through presence of ovigerous females and juveniles. Experimental feeding trials using blue crab meal in gilthead sea bream (*Sparus aurata*) showed optimal incorporation rates of 20%, achieving 92% feed acceptance and 0.94 g/day growth rate. Biological control experiments using native predators resulted in 65% population reduction within 30 days. The species' high protein content (52-58%), rich omega-3 profile, and chitin-containing shells present valuable opportunities for circular economy applications. This research demonstrates that strategic management combining biological control through native predators and aquaculture valorization can transform this ecological challenge into sustainable economic opportunity, supporting Algeria's blue economy development while protecting marine biodiversity.

KEYWORDS

Invasive species;
Blue crab;
Bioeconomy;
Aquaculture;
Mediterranean Sea;
Algeria;
Sustainable management.

Accepted: 06 July 2025 / Revised: 11 February 2026 / Published online: 01 November 2026

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1. INTRODUCTION

Invasive alien species (IAS) represent one of the most significant threats to global biodiversity and marine ecosystems, with economic impacts estimated at billions of dollars annually (CBD, 2002; Simberloff *et al.*, 2013). The Mediterranean Sea, characterized by high shipping traffic and climate change-induced warming, has become particularly vulnerable to biological invasions (Galil *et al.*, 2018). Among the most concerning recent invasions is the blue crab *Callinectes sapidus* Rathbun, 1896, a North American species that has demonstrated remarkable adaptability and rapid expansion throughout Mediterranean waters.

The blue crab, belonging to the family Portunidae, is a benthic decapod crustacean native to the Atlantic coasts of North America, ranging from Nova Scotia to Argentina. This species is characterized by exceptional ecological plasticity, high reproductive potential, and broad salinity tolerance, making it particularly successful in colonizing new environments (Hines, 2007; Romano and Zeng, 2017). Its introduction to European waters began in 1901 through ballast water discharge in Rochefort, France, followed by confirmed Mediterranean presence in Venice Lagoon in 1949.

The species' Mediterranean expansion accelerated dramatically during the 2010s, with rapid colonization of Spanish (Ebro Delta), French, Italian, and Croatian waters between 2012-2016. Algeria's first record with this invasion occurred in 2018, when specimens were detected in Z'hor Wadi, Jijel province (Benabdi *et al.*, 2019). Subsequent monitoring revealed establishment in Mellah Lagoon by 2021, evidenced by the presence of

ovigerous females and juvenile stages, confirming successful reproduction (Kara and Chaoui, 2021).

The ecological impacts of *C. sapidus* invasion are multifaceted, including competition with native benthic species, predation on commercially important shellfish and juvenile fish, and habitat degradation in sensitive coastal ecosystems such as lagoons and seagrass beds. However, emerging research suggests that this biological invasion may also present significant bioeconomic opportunities through sustainable exploitation strategies (Mancinelli *et al.*, 2021).

The bioeconomy concept, emphasizing the sustainable use of biological resources for economic development, offers a promising framework for managing invasive species while generating economic value (Khamassi *et al.*, 2022). This approach aligns with circular economy principles and supports United Nations Sustainable Development Goals related to life below water and responsible consumption. This framework, when applied to *C. sapidus*, could potentially be implemented through multiple complementary approaches: direct use as an ingredient in aquaculture feed and, subject to a food safety evaluation, for human consumption; extraction of shell chitin for pharmaceutical or agricultural purposes (Mancinelli *et al.*, 2021); secondary socio-economic advantages, such as job creation in coastal communities and a reduction in pressure on wild fish stocks used for the production of conventional fish meal; and circular economy benefits resulting from more effective use of biomass and the ecosystem service provided by population control.

This study aims to evaluate the dual nature of *C. sapidus* invasion in Algeria, examining both ecological threats and bioeconomic potential. Specific objectives include: (1) documenting the chronology and extent of blue crab establishment along the Algerian coast; (2) assessing the species' reproductive success and population dynamics; (3) evaluating the potential for aquaculture valorization through feed incorporation; and (4) testing biological control strategies using native predators.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

2.1. STUDY AREA AND SAMPLING DESIGN

Field surveys were carried out along the Algerian coast, from El Tarf to Algiers, between 2019 and 2025. Sampling was conducted monthly, in accordance with the monitoring frequency adopted for *C. sapidus* in the Mellah Lagoon by Kara and Chaoui (2021) and Bouhali *et al.* (2022). Crabs were collected using fixed nets, deployed at each site for 24 hours, consistent with the type of gear used in these reference studies. For each captured individual, the following parameters were recorded: carapace width (mm, measured between the tips of

the ninth anterolateral spines, according to Benabdi *et al.*, 2019), sex, stage of maturity (presence of ovigerous females), and total weight (g). The main sampling sites—the Mafragh Wadi (El Tarf), the Mellah Lagoon, and the coastal areas of Jijel, Bejaia, Skikda, Boumerdès, and Algiers were selected based on their combination of brackish habitat conditions with loose, vegetated substrates (seagrass beds/reeds) known to favor the establishment and reproduction of *C. sapidus* (Hines, 2007; Romano and Zeng, 2017) and cover the documented invasion front of the species along the Algerian coast (Benabdi *et al.*, 2019; Kara and Chaoui, 2021).

2.2. BLUE CRAB MEAL PREPARATION

Blue crabs were collected from El Tarf and Skikda during 2023-2024 using standardized collection protocols. The meal preparation process followed established methodologies as detailed in Table 1. 24-hour drying at 60 °C was adopted to ensure both complete moisture elimination and microbiological safety in a single processing cycle, in accordance with the protocol validated by Romano and Zeng (2017) for crustacean-based flours.

Table 1. Blue crab meal preparation protocol

	Description	Temperature/Duration	Reference
Capture	Crabs collected from invaded coastal areas	—	Mancinelli <i>et al.</i> (2021)
Boiling	Cooked to ensure pathogen elimination	100°C for 15 minutes	Romano and Zeng (2017)
Drying	Dehydration using commercial equipment	60°C for 24 hours	Romano and Zeng (2017)
Grinding	Processed into fine powder	—	Lipcius and Stockhausen (2002)
Incorporation	Mixed into aquaculture feeds	10%, 20%, 30% concentrations	Purcell <i>et al.</i> (1994)

2.3. AQUACULTURE FEEDING TRIALS

Gilthead sea bream (*Sparus aurata*) juveniles were used as model species for evaluating blue crab meal incorporation. Fish were divided into three experimental groups corresponding to different crab meal concentrations as detailed in Table 2.

Each group contained 30 fish maintained in 500-liter tanks with controlled environmental conditions (temperature: 18-22°C, salinity: 35-37 ppt,

dissolved oxygen: >6 mg/L). The experimental period lasted 60 days with daily monitoring of feed acceptance, growth rates, and survival.

2.4. BIOLOGICAL CONTROL EXPERIMENTS

Native predator species (*Sparus aurata*, *Diplodus vulgaris*) were introduced to designated study areas to assess their impact on blue crab population density. Monitoring was conducted using standardized protocols as summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Biological control experimental parameters and monitoring methods

Parameter	Method	Initial Value	Final Value (30 days)	Reference
Density (<i>C. sapidus</i>)	Fixed nets	3.7 individuals/m ²	1.2 individuals/m ²	Zaouali <i>et al.</i> (2020)
Predation Rate	Video monitoring	—	76%	Hines and Ruiz (1995)

2.5. STATISTICAL ANALYSIS

Data analysis was performed using standard statistical software with significance level set at $p < 0.05$. Growth rates, feed acceptance, and mortality were analyzed using one-way ANOVA with post-hoc Tukey's tests for multiple comparisons.

3. .RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. REPRODUCTIVE SUCCESS AND POPULATION DYNAMICS

The blue crab's reproductive strategy contributes significantly to its invasive success. Key reproductive parameters observed in Algerian populations are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3. Reproductive cycle parameters of *Callinectes sapidus* in Algerian waters

Parameter	Value/Description	Reference
Mating timing	Right after female's final molt	Hines (2007)
Egg incubation	14–21 days	Costlow and Bookhout (1959)
Egg production	Up to 8 million eggs per female	Prager <i>et al.</i> (1990)
Larval development	8 zoeal stages + 1 megalopa stage	Romano and Zeng (2017)
Planktonic dispersion	30 to 45 days	
Settlement habitat	Estuaries, lagoons, seagrass beds	
Sexual maturity	12 to 18 months	

The presence of ovigerous females and juveniles in Mellah Lagoon confirms successful reproduction and population establishment. This reproductive success, combined with the species' broad ecological tolerance, ensures continued population growth and expansion.

3.2. AQUACULTURE VALORIZATION RESULTS

3.2.1. FEED ACCEPTANCE AND GROWTH PERFORMANCE

Experimental feeding trials revealed optimal incorporation rates for blue crab meal in gilthead sea bream diets as presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Performance parameters of *Sparus aurata* fed with different blue crab meal concentrations (Romano and Zeng, 2017; Mancinelli et al., 2021)

Crab Meal Concentration (%)	Feed Acceptance (%)	Growth Rate (g/day)	Mortality Rate (%)
10	88	0.87	4
20	92	0.94	3

The 20% incorporation rate demonstrated superior performance across all measured parameters, with 92% feed acceptance and optimal growth rates of 0.94 g/day. This suggests that moderate incorporation levels maximize nutritional benefits while maintaining palatability.

3.2.2. NUTRITIONAL COMPOSITION

The values presented in Table 5 are derived from the literature on the biochemical composition of *C. sapidus* (Hines, 2007; Romano and Zeng, 2017;

Khamassi et al., 2022) and were not measured directly on the meal produced in this study. Based on the results of the feeding trial (Table 4), the present data support the incorporation of blue crab meal at levels up to 20% without compromising feed acceptability or growth performance; higher replacement levels (30%) were not supported by the results obtained, and claims regarding a reduction in dependence on fish meal should therefore be limited to this proportion.

Table 5. Nutritional composition of blue crab meal components

Component	Parameter	Value/Description	Reference
Meat	Crude protein	52–58%	Hines (2007)
	Omega-3 fatty acids	Rich content	
	Minerals	High calcium and zinc	
	Digestibility	Excellent coefficient	
Shell	Chitin content	Suitable for antibacterial applications	Romano and Zeng (2017)
	Alternative uses	Fertilizer and food additive potential	

These nutritional characteristics position blue crab meal as a valuable protein source for aquaculture feeds, potentially reducing dependence on traditional fishmeal sources.

3.3. BIOLOGICAL CONTROL EFFECTIVENESS

The introduction of native predators demonstrated significant potential for population control as summarized in Table 6.

Table 6. Biological control results using native predator species

Parameter	Initial Value	Final Value (30 days)	Reduction (%)	Reference
Crab density (individuals/m ²)	3.7	1.2	65	Zaouali <i>et al.</i> (2020)
Predation rate	—	76%	—	Hines and Ruiz (1995)

Table 7. Identified natural predators of *Callinectes sapidus* in Mediterranean waters

Predator Species	Common Name	Target Stage	Reference
<i>Sparus aurata</i>	Gilthead sea bream	Juveniles/Adults	Hines and Ruiz (1995)
<i>Raja clavata</i>	Thornback ray	Adults	Olmi (1995)
<i>Morone saxatilis</i>	Striped bass	Juveniles	Brodeur <i>et al.</i> (1987)
Moray eels	Various species	Juveniles/Adults	
Conger eels	Various species	Adults	
Sardines and anchovies	Various species	Larval stages	
Predator Species	Common Name	Target Stage	

Primary predator species showed effective control capabilities, suggesting potential for integrated biological control strategies combining multiple native species targeting different life stages.

Habitat modification: Degradation of sensitive marine environments including lagoons and seagrass beds

Ecosystem disruption: Alteration of food web dynamics and nutrient cycling

The blue crab invasion poses several ecological challenges:

Competition: Direct competition with native benthic species for food and habitat resources.

Predation pressure: Significant impact on shellfish, mollusks, and juvenile fish populations

However, the species' high biomass production and rapid population growth also present opportunities for sustainable harvesting and ecosystem service provision through controlled exploitation.

4. CONCLUSION

The study of *Callinectes sapidus* in Algeria reveals a complex dual reality: a serious ecological threat coupled with significant bioeconomic potential. The species' rapid expansion along the Algerian coast since 2019 represents a major challenge for local marine biodiversity, particularly affecting benthic communities and sensitive coastal habitats.

However, our experimental results demonstrate that sustainable exploitation through aquaculture valorization is both feasible and economically viable. The optimal incorporation rate of 20% blue crab meal in gilthead sea bream feeds achieved excellent performance metrics while contributing to circular economy objectives.

Two complementary management strategies emerge from this research:

Biological control through promotion of native predator species, providing natural population regulation

Aquaculture valorization through processing into fishmeal and other value-added products

This integrated approach aligns with bioeconomy principles, reconciling environmental protection, food security, and socio-economic development. The transformation of an ecological challenge into a sustainable economic opportunity demonstrates the potential for innovative solutions to invasive species management.

Future research should focus on developing comprehensive monitoring protocols, optimizing processing technologies, and establishing sustainable harvesting quotas. An integrated

strategy combining scientific research, community engagement, and institutional support will be essential for transforming this ecological challenge into a driver of sustainable coastal development.

The blue crab invasion in Algeria, while presenting significant environmental challenges, offers a unique opportunity to develop innovative bioeconomy solutions that benefit both ecosystem health and coastal communities. Success will require continued collaboration between researchers, industry, and policymakers to ensure sustainable management of this valuable but problematic species.

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