

A LOBSTER'S TALE

CONSERVING CORNWALL'S EUROPEAN LOBSTER

STORY AND ILLUSTRATION
BY FRANCESCA PAGE

The hatchery rears juveniles through their first four stages of life, lasting 4 to 6 weeks.

STAGE 2

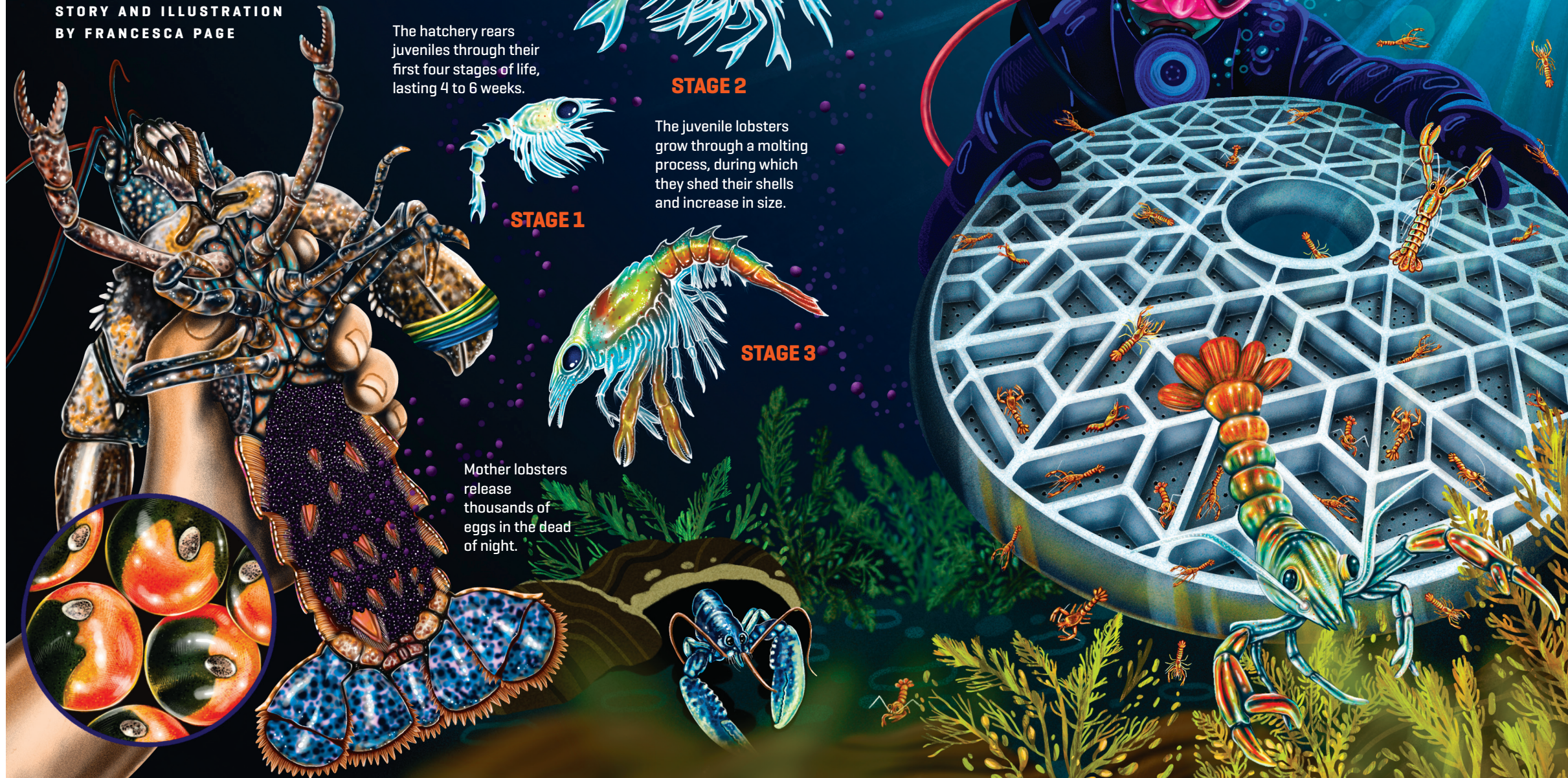
The juvenile lobsters grow through a molting process, during which they shed their shells and increase in size.

STAGE 1

STAGE 3

Mother lobsters release thousands of eggs in the dead of night.

Once they reach an inch in length, they are transferred to the Aquahive system before being released into the ocean.



Thousands of inch-long, perfectly formed baby lobsters swirl in seawater tanks, their miniature worlds carefully crafted to nurture the next generation of these iconic U.K. marine creatures. These tiny lives represent a pioneering approach to preventive conservation led by the National Lobster Hatchery (NLH) in Padstow, Cornwall. Since 2000, the NLH has championed the European lobster by collaborating with Cornish fishers, scientists and local businesses, creating a ripple effect of positive change along the Cornish coastline.

Lobsters are central to Cornish fishing history and rank as one of the U.K.'s most valuable marine species, generating £40 million (\$50 million USD) annually. However, with the human population projected to reach 9 billion in 2037, pressure on fisheries is increasing. The most recent U.K. government fisheries management plan reveals that European lobster populations are declining across much of the U.K.

"If their population crashes here, they face the real danger of never recovering," says Ryan Hunnisett, a scuba instructor who partners with the NLH on lobster releases.

"The U.K. is the last stronghold for the European lobster."

The hatchery's mission is simple but effective: Raise and release lobster hatchlings into the wild, boost survival rates by up to 1,000 times, and enable research and education. "Since opening the hatchery doors in 2000, we have reared and released more than half a million juvenile lobsters," says Elaine Dyer, head of communications at NLH.

Ben Marshall, head of production at the hatchery, points out a "berried hen" [an egg-bearing female lobster] carrying

thousands of black, berry-like eggs under her tail. "Depending on her size, she can carry anywhere from 2,000 to 45,000 eggs. In the wild, only one in 20,000 will survive," he explains. "That's where we come in. We nurture them through the early stages until they're ready for release."

The NLH relies on a network of willing Cornish fishers to land berried hens and notify the hatchery for collection. "Without local fishers providing egg-carrying lobsters, our work wouldn't be possible," Marshall says.

Fisher Dan Gilbert adds, "In the '80s, catching 40 lobsters a day was good. Now, on a peak season day, I can catch over 100 lobsters. The growth has been significant!" With lobsters taking up to seven years to reach sexual maturity, the NLH's efforts are only beginning to show results, benefiting both ecosystems and local communities. "The NLH is the perfect example of collaboration; everybody wins!" Hunnisett adds.

After nine to 12 months of incubation, berried hens perform "handstands" in the dead of night, releasing hatchlings

into the water column, which staff eagerly collect.

Tiny lobsters start their life cycle in larval cones, large conical vessels specifically designed to circulate seawater, ensuring the larvae remain suspended, a crucial condition for their development. Within weeks, they molt several times and transform into miniature versions of adult lobsters. They then move to the space-efficient Aquahive hatchery system. Each hive holds 4,000 juvenile lobsters, safely separated on divided trays to prevent cannibalism.

At an inch long, the young lobsters

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are ready for release. The NLH disperses them across Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly via trained scuba divers, fishers and shoreline release teams. "Seeing people's joy when they release baby lobsters into the sea makes it all worth it," Hunnisett says. His lobster release dives and courses have taught hundreds about lobster biology and conservation, facilitating the release of tens of thousands of juvenile lobsters along the Cornish coastline.

For over 25 years, the NLH has transformed Cornwall's coastline and advanced lobster conservation, combining innovative research with hands-on public education. At the Padstow facility, visitors can deepen their understanding of marine conservation and sustainable seafood practices, helping to ensure a robust future for Cornwall's lobsters.

Reflecting on the hatchery's impact, fisher Gilbert notes, "The hatchery has done a lot to educate the public and put the spotlight on lobsters. The more people care, the stronger our sustainable fishing practices become, benefiting the hatchery, the community and the ocean alike."