

# **The Continued Decline of the European Eel (*Anguilla anguilla*) in UK and European waters**

Eel stocks of the UK and across Europe have shown continued decline for many years. One contributing factor is the increasing pressure from commercial exploitation by the netting of the eel at all stages of their lifecycle to supply what is now an international trade across Europe and the Far East of both Elvers and eels. Combining this with increased pressures on breeding stocks from loss's of habitats, obstructions to migration, and the possible effects from parasites (*Anguillicola Crassus*), If measures are not implemented rapidly the long-term survival of the species will be threatened.

The Freshwater Eels complex life cycle has been relatively understudied for many years, increased monitoring and survey work is needed so as to understand fully the current status of the stocks in both the UK and across Europe, and to assess fully the future management options and their future implications and effects.

The eel fills a major niche within the aquatic eco-system, providing a major food source for both the Grey Heron (*Aredea Cinerea*) and the Bittern (*Botaurus Stellaris*) and many other species of water birds. Otters are also well known to prefer eels as the major part of their diet. Europe will find it hard to meet its commitments under the Rio Plan for aquatic environmental development without a committed approach to address the problems caused by the over-exploitation of the eel

Increased exploitation and environmental pressure at all stages of the eels lifecycle is putting breeding stock and long-term survival of species at increasing risk. A reluctance to recognise the seriousness of the decline by fisheries staff and limited resources has lead to widespread illegal netting activities in the UK. Many of the existing fisheries regulations, relating to netsmen, and their catch returns provide limited or vastly inaccurate figures of commercial catches. This situation is also common across many other European countries. We recognise the need for individual countries to put in place management plans to protect their individual stocks but also highlight the need for greater co-operation in the management and study across Europe.

UK representatives of the European Anglers Alliance requests:

- Increased co-operation across Europe to introduce measures that will contribute to, and secure, the long-term survival of the Eel.
- Introduction of restrictions to limit the numbers of nets within the commercial fishery particularly in areas which show continued declines in population stocks - (ICES Recommendation to reduce effects of commercial fisheries at ALL stages of the eels lifecycle.
- Measures to minimise obstructions to both upstream migration of Elvers and downstream migration of mature Eels.

- Introduction of a stocking programme of Elvers into areas currently showing low population densities due to migration obstructions or that have shown a serious decline in mature eel escapement due to over-exploitation.
- Consideration of introduction of restrictions at catchment level, to promote increased numbers of escaping mature eels so as to increase breeding stock.
- Increased funding for survey work to accurately assess Eel population dynamics so as to better monitor current stock status and the effects of management plan actions.
- Increased funding and commitment to bring about an intensification of the fight against illegal netmen.
- Introduction of legislation to require all sales and exports of Elvers and Eels to be through licensed registered dealerships, both in the UK and Europe (UK recommendation from MAFF freshwater fisheries review 2000)
- Recognition and protection of the Eels part in the eco-system of the aquatic environment. A commitment to include the protection of eel stocks in wider plans to promote aquatic bio-diversity (Rio action plans).
- Increased research into *Anguillicola Crassus* to determine its possible effects on mature eel migration survival.

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And collectively on behalf of the Eel conservation Society 27/01/02