

# Net shots of elvers traffickers, a protected animal species

Since its non-EU export ban in 2009, poaching and resale of the eel fry, endangered migratory fish is exploding. The traffic installed to meet growing Asian demand is almost as profitable as coke.

By NICOLAS LEGENDRE Rennes, correspondence

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The black market of Civelle has taken over the official trade, because the demand in Asia remains very strong. REGIS DUVIGNAU

The operation required five months of investigation, dozens of hours of listening, marking of vehicles, spinning mills, more than one hundred gendarmes and officials mobilized, thirteen arrests carried out.

Started in mid-April in four departments of the Atlantic coast (Vendée, Loire-Atlantique, Ille-et-Vilaine and Morbihan), as part of an ongoing investigation, it presents all the attributes of a net in the deep waters of the narcotrafic. In reality, it aims to dismantle international trafficking in a protected animal

species: the glass eel or the eel fry - the eel fry, a migratory fish threatened with extinction.

The poaching and resale of this translucent fry, mainly destined for Asian markets, has intensified since the beginning of 2010, because it was decided in 2009 to ban its export from the European Union ( EU), with the aim of protecting it. Experienced petty criminals and receivers share an estimated loot of several hundred million euros a year. Many of these transcontinental sectors are rooted in France.

## **Black market**

Once abundant, the European eel ( *Anguilla anguilla* ) suffers a slaughter. According to the French Agency for Biodiversity, the quantity of specimens present in hexagonal waters has decreased by 75% in thirty years. In particular, the construction of dams, the channeling of rivers, pollution, fishing, poaching and parasitism. The 530 French fishermen with a license are subject to quotas. During the 2017-2018 season, they were allowed to take 65 tonnes of glass eel out of the water, which is nearly 80% of the total legal fishing done in Europe.

On the other side of the globe, *Anguilla japonica* , the Asian cousin of the European eel, has declined dramatically for similar reasons. In Japan, the fishing season that is coming to an end is the worst ever recorded. The black market has therefore taken over the official trade, because the demand for this popular dish in Asia remains very strong. Hence the

transfer to European eels, even illegal, to fatten them on the spot.

Despite serious research, no one in Asia, nor in Europe, has been able to obtain in the laboratory the reproduction of a species known to be born on the Sargasso Sea side, before crossing the Atlantic to the Atlantic Ocean. fry when it measures only a few centimeters.

## **"Almost as profitable as coke"**

This exceptional animal has a price: it oscillated between 150 euros and 550 euros per kilo, in France, during the winter 2017-2018. The odds of smugglers' eels, which have come alive - after a plane ride in airtight bags - in Hong Kong, the hub of global protected species trafficking, reach 1,000 to 4,000 euros per kilo. It is the equivalent of a good quality caviar.

*"The glass eel is almost as profitable as coke, the boredom less!" José Jouneau, president of the Pays de la Loire Regional Fisheries Committee, the main French region for this fishery. "The repression and prosecution of offenses have not kept pace with the rise of trafficking, says Antoine Tugas, a lawyer. It may have been difficult for public prosecutors to first consider the extent of the phenomenon. We are facing real organizations, a huge amount of traffic."*

In the Atlantic estuaries, the official fishermen have become accustomed to the presence of poachers. Some testify clashes between each other, throwing stones, intimidation, threats, or

even "*dog releases*". Prosecution with the police, forced barrages and gunfire are not uncommon during control operations. Since the beginning of the 2010s, an "audience elves" devoted to poaching is held each year at the District Court of Nantes.

## "A form of omerta"

*"Some names come back often, says Antonin Rousseau, prosecutor's assistant . Families of travelers from Loire-Atlantique specialized in the traffic of glass eels. Their members sometimes poop from father to son. " Duly authorized fishermen were worried by justice. "We all have our black sheep unfortunately," sighs José Jouneau . It is sometimes difficult for a fisherman not to give in to the sound of sirens. "*

The sirens in question are the middlemen who procure elvers under the mantle. Among them are first and foremost some wholesalers that justice holds in its sights. In France, a dozen wholesalers have an authorization to buy and sell these fry. Some seem to evolve out of nails.

A single fishmonger has agreed to answer the *World* , under cover of anonymity. The applicant, who claims to work "*in accordance with the law*" , describes a "*fairly closed environment* , governed by "*a form of omerta*" . "*There are more and more parallel networks,*" he explains. *I am regularly approached by dubious intermediaries. "A glass eel fisherman added, also anonymously: " The wholesalers were*

*exporting to Asia before it was banned: they retained their contacts and expertise. "*

## **The vice tightens on the traffickers**

The manager of a fish trading company based in Loire-Atlantique has thus been indicted and placed under judicial control in 2016. His trial is to be held in the coming months. Two of his Vendée counterparts are in pre-trial detention following the gendarmerie operation held in mid-April. According to a source close to the case, this measure is a first at the European level for alleged eel traffickers. Another source indicates that the investigation, still in progress, could lead to the "*biggest case*" of illegal trade in elvers ever uncovered on the continent.

For two years, the vice has tightened on the traffickers. The Europol agency, in cooperation with the services of six EU countries, coordinated a major offensive in 2017. Balance: 48 arrests and large seizures - four tons of fry, luxury cars, one million euros in cash and gold bullion.

One of the organizations involved would have generated up to "*280 million euros*" in five years through traffic. In Morocco, in early 2018, 60 kilos of young eels packed in ten suitcases were intercepted at Casablanca airport. A few weeks later, four Chinese, three Spaniards and three Moroccans were arrested in Spain and Portugal. Police seized on this occasion 460 kilos of elvers and 364 suitcases "*potentially used for contraband*".

Europol and the NGO Sustainable Eel Group (SEG), the European reference in the field, estimate that between eight and one hundred tonnes of glass eels are poached in the EU each year. Studies to clarify these data are in progress. These volumes would generate a total illicit turnover of 200 million to nearly 3 billion euros. In this context, Andrew Kerr, president of the SEG, does not hesitate to assert that the glass eel is "*European ivory*". Until 2016, in France, poachers of eel fry were only fined. The law now provides for suspended prison sentences. Resellers, meanwhile, face up to seven years in prison and 750,000 euros fine.

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