

## Trafficking Threatens Eel Recovery

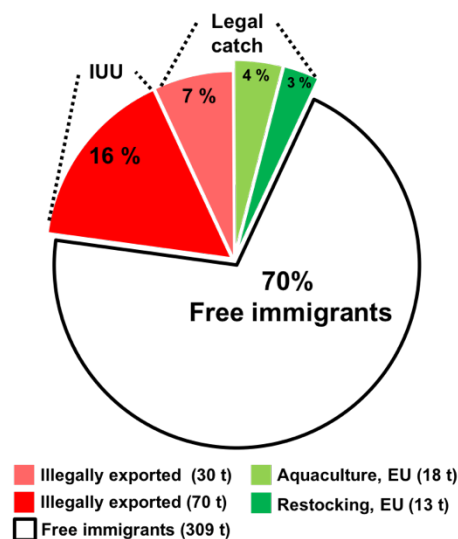
**Sustainable Eel Group, 06 April 2018.** Recent successful operations mounted by Spanish and Portuguese Police, with support from Europol, have brought into sharp focus the collective failure to control the illegal trade in glass eels to Asia. A Press Conference on Friday, 06 April 2018, announced these successes in Madrid.

The European Eel is the subject of several EU-Regulations that aim to protect the stock and enable its sustainable use – accordingly there is a ban on all export and import from and into the EU. Additionally, global trade is restricted by listing the eel at CITES Appendix II. Jointly, these measures intend to control and limit trade, as well as address other negative human impacts, such as habitat loss, turbine mortalities and blocked migration pathways.

The press conference revealed the recent arrest of 10 people from Spain, Morocco and China, who were active in this illegal trade of buying, packing and dispatching of estimated 35 million glass eels from Europe to Asia. The gang started their operation from Portugal and moved to southern tip of Spain halfway through the season, aiming to smuggle the eels in suitcases to Morocco and further to Asia.

The fish were packed in plastic bags and placed in large suitcases, which could carry about 30 kilos, or 105 000 fish. Grown on for one year in Asian ponds, that is worth some 670 000 EUR. SEPRONA and EUROPOL<sup>1</sup> at the conference stated that they estimate that the total trafficking might well amount to some 100 tons of glass eels, or 350 million fish, for a total value of 2 27 billion EUR.<sup>2</sup>

Over a couple of enforcement operations (code names SUCCULENTA, SUCCULENCIA, BLACK GLASS and ABAIA), about 80 people from Europe, Asia and North Africa were arrested for smuggling eels so far.



The trend in the number of glass eels that enter continental waters (recruitment) is one of the indicators to assess the stock status. According to Bornarel et al (2017)<sup>3</sup> the European eel recruitment was 440 t in 2015. In following figure, SEG considers this number as the current annual recruitment, representing the full pie. Each segment represents a different destination. The "Free immigrants" represent the proportion that is not caught. Figures for aquaculture, restocking and illegal exports from legal catch result from SEG-Report-2018-1-V1.

Willem Dekker, one of Europe's leading eel scientist and an architect of the 2007 Eel Regulation, said "*The scale of these illegal exports is challenging the protection policies within the EU. If we cannot control this, it will likely frustrate the recovery of the eel across Europe*".

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.europol.europa.eu/newsroom/news/glass-eel-traffickers-earned-more-eur-37-million-illegal-exports-to-asia>

<sup>2</sup> Anonymous (2018) Quantifying the illegal trade in European glass eels (*Anguilla anguilla*): Evidences and Indicators. Sustainable Eel Group. SEG-Report:2018-1-V1

<sup>3</sup> Bornarel V, Lambert P, Briand C, Antunes C, Belpaire C, Ciccotti E, Diaz E, Diserud O, Doherty D, Domingos I, Evans D, de Graaf M, O'Leary C, Pedersen M, Poole R, Walker A, Wickström H, Beaulaton L, Drouineau H (2017) Modelling the recruitment of European eel (*Anguilla anguilla*) throughout its European range, *ICES Journal of Marine Science*, fsx180, <https://doi.org/10.1093/icesjms/fsx180>

The eel is a remarkable fish with an extraordinary life cycle that engenders great passion and nowhere more so than within the Sustainable Eel Group (SEG). SEG is an NGO of the leaders from eel science, conservation and the commercial worlds – with the objective to accelerate the recovery of the eel stock.

Its Chairman Andrew Kerr said *“We have been waiting for this moment for some time. Whilst welcoming and congratulating the local police efforts, we emphasize that this shocking situation indicates a gross failure of control by Member States and the European Commission. When are we going to see the determination to stop trafficking, in all countries?”*