

La traque musclée contre les braconniers de bébés anguilles

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INQUIRY - Classified in danger of extinction, eel fry, called elvers, are much sought after by Asians, ready to pay them a fortune. What inspire poachers more and more organized and violent in France. In front of them, police of the environment and gendarmes join forces to try to put an end to the traffic.

In the damp, moonless night on the banks of the Charente, the water runs cold and fast. A small neck leaves an escape on the side of the gates that are closed to stem the influx of the rising tide at the mouths of the rivers. Leaves rush down the stream by the narrow passage in a frantic race with all sorts of small debris. There must also be glass eels. It is in any case one of the "spots" among the dozen around Rochefort (Charente-Maritime), regularly frequented by poachers who frantically look for small eel fry. A commodity that today is worth gold, from 300 to 500 euros per kilo for the fisherman.

Nothing stops these river skimmers in their desire to obtain these small fish a few centimeters, wriggling and translucent. It does not matter to them that this species whose populations have collapsed in recent years is classified by the IUCN (International Union for the Conservation of Nature) as a "Critically Endangered". Asians demand and, to get, are willing to pay very expensive: from 3000 to 6000 euros for the last intermediary.

Carried for several months by the Gulf Stream, the larvae of *Anguilla anguilla*, from the Sargasso Sea (Northwest Atlantic), are transformed into fry near our shores. Guided by their instincts, they fight to leave the ocean and join, by rivers they will go back over several tens of kilometers, the ponds and swamps where they will become eels. They are born in salt water but grow in fresh water.

An adaptation that is done at the mouth of the rivers and lasts several weeks, between October and May. The fry, which are still swimming very badly, are transported at each rising tide. When she comes down, they try to settle on meadows or pebbles and wait for the next tide to regain some ground. They advance fifty meters and back twenty each time. "*In brackish waters, this is where poachers are waiting,*" says Nicolas Surugue, regional director of New Aquitaine in the AFB.

Organized gangs

The fight against this illegal fishing has therefore become a priority of the authorities. On this night of mid-March, there are about twenty members of the environment police (which reports to the AFB, French Agency for Biodiversity) and representatives of the gendarmerie's surveillance and intervention platoon, which will be deployed on several sites, in and around Rochefort, to try to intercept poachers. Nothing is left to chance. At midnight thirty, all the teams are together. Last dress rehearsal, plans in support, before sneaking into the field one or two hours before the possible arrival of illegal fishermen.

"Thirty years ago, it was a little like porcini mushrooms, people came looking for elvers to make a dish, it cost nothing" Michel Vignaud, in charge of coordinating all the migratory police services within the AFB *"It's an ideal night for fishing fry: the weather is mild, the night is dark and the good tide ratio for elvers, comes around 3 am,"* says Michel Vignaud, in charge of coordination between all Migrant Police Services within the AFB. Operations which are also carried out in connection with the Central Office of the fight against damage to the environment and public health (OCLAESP).

It is during these nights that the police of the environment hope the flagrante delicto. And we are far from the truculent image of the guardian played by Louis de Funès in the film *Ni vu or known to Yves Robert in 1958, armed with a colorful verb and a notebook. Bulletproof vests, handguns, infrared binoculars and hours of hiding are nowadays required. And if necessary, harrow on the roads to prevent any leakage. "Thirty years ago, it was a little like porcini mushrooms, people came looking for elvers to make a dish, it cost nothing", Michel Vignaud amuses himself.*

Today, traffickers are in organized gangs, insulted in the mouth, sometimes armed, ready to fight and force the roadblocks. The more years pass, the more they organize themselves with watchers, and a system that allows them to get rid of the goods as quickly as possible with accomplices to avoid getting caught with too large quantities. That night, out of the three teams, environment police and mixed gendarmes, only one will jam a group early in the morning with 3.8 kg of fingerlings that will be released immediately.

"It all started after the war," says the researcher. At that time, the pressure on the eel as a result of the development of the fishery increased considerably. Some pollution has also occurred with the use of pesticides. In those years, thousands of hydraulic structures were built along the rivers that either prevent fry from rising upstream or block or crush the eels in the turbine blades when they come down towards the sea. Lastly, climate change and droughts are critical to their vital space ... Illegal fishing is therefore putting tremendous pressure on weakened populations. Multifactorial causes, of which *"it is very difficult to determine precisely the responsibility for each one of them"*, stresses Nicolas Surugue.

Regulation "eel"

The first measures come in 2007. Europe is drafting the eel regulation, which restricts fishing and provides for restocking measures. In 2009, the eel is listed on the Cites (the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora), which fights against trafficking. In 2010, France launches its safeguarding plan. *"The effort that is made is in millions of euros,"* says Nicolas Surugue: scientific monitoring, river development, installation of fish passes and, of course, drastic restriction of fishing. It is forbidden to amateurs, and the number of professional fishermen, limited by quotas, has also decreased.

Part of the fishery is destined for restocking, for neighboring countries but also in France, which gives us a system of which we alone have the secret: fishermen recover fry, the state buys them and will give them a little further in another river! *"These repopulation mechanisms are in any case very uncertain,"* regrets Laurent Beaulaton. *"There's a lot of wastage along the way, it's annoying, we're doing a lot worse than nature."*

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services within the AFB. The fight against poaching is an essential part of this plan, and not only has the hunt been considerably professionalized, but now justice follows. "*A few years ago, when we spent in correctional, next to touching stories, the glass eel was not very serious,*" says Michel Vignaud.

Today, a cooperation has been organized between the public prosecutors of Nantes, Saint-Nazaire and Bordeaux, which allow an immediate appearance of poachers. Sanctions have also been strengthened. For organized smuggling, poachers face up to seven years in prison and 750,000 euros in fines. The first prison sentences fell last year for repeat offenders. It is also in 2017 that catches broke records. In Roissy in particular, 500 kg of alleged shrimp were ready to be shipped. "*Of course French shrimp going to Thailand, it's always fishy,*" laughs one of the members of the AFB.

Many efforts that finally seem rewarded

"*We have a slight improvement since 2012,*" welcomed all stakeholders, who watch for future statements. The coming month of May marks the end of the elver fishing for the year. Some 300 checks will have been carried out. Until the fall, police services will be able to deal with other issues. In the rivers, the small fry that have survived will turn into yellow eels. And then one day, they will dress in silver. This will be the signal for the big comeback. They will descend the streams to the ocean and resume the millennium migration across the Atlantic to reach their Sargasso Sea. Eight, ten or twelve years will have passed.