

More action needed on European eel?

The stock of the European eel (*Anguilla anguilla*) is in a critical condition. This fish, once dominant in most watercourses around Europe, has been in decline for a long period. For more than a century, loss of freshwater habitats, and blocked access to others, has made the stock decline. After 1980, the situation deteriorated rapidly, when recruitment of young eel from the ocean crashed, going down (by circa 15% per year) for thirty years in a row!

This happened all over Europe, and the problem to protect and recover the eel is indeed a European problem. In 2007, the EU adopted a coherent protection plan for this fish (Regulation (EC) No 1100/2007 – the so called ‘Eel Regulation’), which included restrictions to fisheries, reductions of other impacts on the eel stock, and a ban on the export of any eel from the EU to outside countries (banned since 2010).

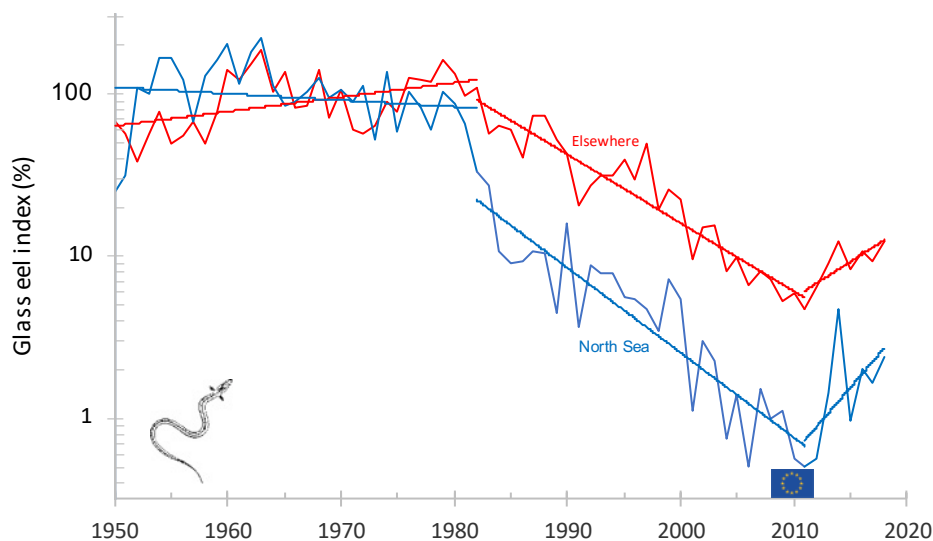


Figure 1 Trends in the abundance of glass eel arriving at the European continent (From the oral presentation “Eel, the Eurofish” by W. Dekker, at SEG’s 10th Anniversary, London 2019. Data: ICES 2018; linear trend lines added for 1950-1980, 1982-2011 and 2011-2018. Note the logarithmic scale of the vertical axis).

After decades of negligence and decline, the EU eel policy to protect the eel is a success: awareness of the situation is growing; actions are being taken to protect the eel all over Europe; and debates on the causes, on available options, and on consequences have intensified. In 2007, the political decisions were taken in Brussels; in 2009, the very first eels were protected; it is only in 2011 (two years of ocean migrations later), that the first positive effect could be expected. Lo and behold, that is exactly what we observe: since 2011, the thirty-year decline in recruitment of young eel from the ocean halted, turning into a slight increase (Figure 1). Though the stock is still only a small fraction of what it has been before, this indicates that protection policies can have an impact. It will take a long time (once more a period of thirty years?) to achieve full recovery. Furthermore, we have to acknowledge that it is only a short range of years yet of upward trend. Additionally, we have to face the fact that the level of protection for the eel is not yet as good as we intended to achieve in many areas. At the bottom line, however, it is very promising to note that the trend is as positive as could have been expected – we could not realistically have hoped for any more.

This improving picture strongly urges all parties involved to further implement the European eel protection policies and to polish up what actions have already been taken.

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