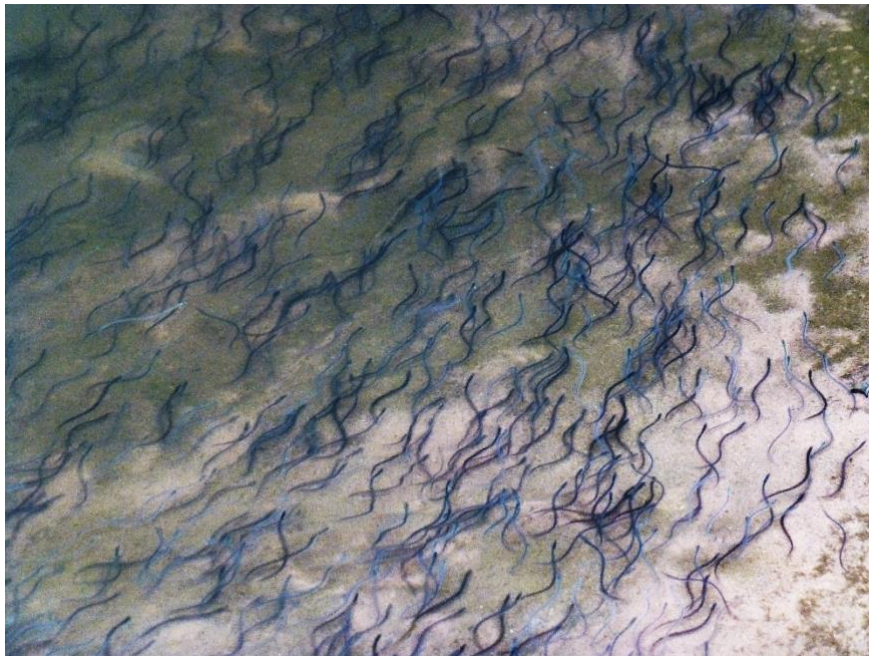


Brexit impacts the protection and sustainable use of the European eel

Following the publication of the EU and UK trade deal, the Sustainable Eel Group is concerned that restrictions on trade will affect both the protection and sustainable use of the European eel.



A long eel tradition

Humanity has millennia long and rich tradition of fishing and eating eels. And eels are an important part of the biodiversity in our rivers and lakes. But the European eel is protected, following decades of decline. Fishing and trade are tightly regulated across Europe to ensure that the stock can recover and that exploitation will be sustainable. But eel trade has been impacted by the Brexit trade talks and is likely to have an effect on the eel's recovery, as well as livelihoods that depend on them.

Impact on trade and business

The outcome of the trade talks between the UK and EU mean the following for eel trade:

- Baby eels (elvers) caught in the Severn, Parrett and other rivers in England and Wales can no longer be exported (the majority for conservation restocking contracts) to Europe,
- As Northern Ireland is treated as part of the EU for trade purposes, existing annual exports of elvers from England to restock Lough Neagh in Northern Ireland will also have to cease,
- Merchants will no longer be able to import farmed eels from Europe (e.g., for smoked eel or jellied eel), which are widely enjoyed in delicatessens and restaurants.

This will cause a significant financial impact on those businesses and fishermen that rely on this trade.

Impact on protection and sustainable use

Currently, England catches and exports approximately four tonnes of elvers each year (12 million fish) from just a few rivers. These eels are surplus to the natural requirements of those rivers given the historical loss of habitats (wetlands) and current migration barriers (weirs) in rivers, so these would normally die naturally due to overcrowding. Three tonnes of these (9 million fish) are stocked into underpopulated rivers and lakes in Northern Ireland and Europe to enhance the eel populations there - creating more adults to spawn and

help the species to recover. Without this trade, the surplus eels will die naturally in the English rivers, will create no benefit elsewhere, so protection and sustainable use will suffer.

Additionally, the availability of a major concentration of young eels in the river mouths greatly increases the pressure of illegal traders to catch and traffick these to lucrative markets abroad. Illegal trafficking is a major issue in European eel management.

Furthermore, we are concerned that the coming change in eel trade restrictions, will lead to a fragmentation of what have been co-ordinated policies and legislation between European countries to protect and regulate use of the eel.

The Sustainable Eel Group is therefore very concerned about the outcome of the trade talks and the impact on the protection and sustainable use of this important and vulnerable fish.

We will continue to press for co-ordinated action to protect the eel throughout its range, regardless of political and trade boundaries.

In the short term we call for sustainable use of the elvers in UK rivers. We call for support for them to be fished and transported to inaccessible and under populated rivers and lakes above migration barriers across England and Wales, and thereby supporting the growing rewilding movement. Robust biosecurity procedures will be imperative to prevent the spread of disease, parasites and non-native species.

We will work with UK and EU government officials, the commercial sector and conservation organisations for well regulated fisheries, trade and traceability, to minimise the impact on businesses and maximise protection for and sustainable use of the much loved and fascinating European eel.