

In July 2020, SEG published our [vision](#) on the status of the European eel stock, and formulated our aspiration for recovery. In this text, we shift our focus to the management process, the effective implementation of the adopted policy, its objectives and achievements.

## The decline in our time

The eel stock is currently at a historical low, after a decline of many decades (if not centuries). Stock abundance and fishing yield have declined gradually since at least the mid-1900s, and the recruitment of young eels from the ocean declined rapidly from 1980 until 2010. If nothing had changed then extinction would have loomed eventually. In 2007 however, the EU adopted the 'Eel Regulation', setting a framework for protection across Europe, to recover the stock to its historic level of abundance.



As attractive as that “recovery to historic abundance” sounds, it is very far away from today’s reality. It will take many decades to reach, and even more, it remains to be seen whether that full recovery is ever achievable. Are we willing to invest so heavily in adapting all water pumps and hydropower stations, to benefit the recovery of the eel? If we stop all fishing, can we then effectively prevent massive poaching, with millions of people living so close to the eel’s habitats? Are we really willing to give up large areas of reclaimed land and drained marshes? Hence, eel management is a complex issue, negotiating between ‘desirable’ and ‘achievable’, involving very different stakeholders, in almost all countries across Europe and the Mediterranean. However, whatever the ultimate fate, adequate protection is the only way to achieve the desired recovery. And adequately protecting is the only thing we can actually do right now, country by country. Then, we have to maintain that level of protection for as long as it takes. Whether we will achieve the ultimate goal of a fully recovered stock or not, we will only know when the time comes, many decades from now. But for now, we must do the right thing, to enable our best hope for the future.

## The progress to make

Three decades ago, discussions began on what to do with the deteriorating state of the eel stock. Two decades ago, the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea (ICES) advised to compile a recovery plan for the sustainable exploitation of the eel stock across Europe. One decade ago, such a plan was adopted (the EU Eel Regulation 2007) and implemented in national Eel Management Plans. So where are we now, a decade after the implementation - and where do we want to be after a second decade?



Protective measures were taken from about 2009. By 2011, the downward trend in the glass eel came to a halt (and now is bouncing up and down irregularly). While we cannot yet claim this success as ours, the break in the downward trend evidently does suggest that the Eel Regulation is working.

The Eel Regulation has wide-spread positive effects: protective measures have been taken in most countries, predominantly concerning the fisheries (i.e. non-fishing impacts largely still have to be addressed).

Has the agreed minimal protection level been achieved, and does that now allow recovery of the stock? In some countries and areas it has - but in many others, additional measures are needed. Hence, it is important to bring the protection to the required minimal level (or more) in all areas, urgently.

The first step, adoption of the Eel Regulation, has worked well. Now we must make the second step to improve/complete its implementation, and achieve the required protection in all countries where the eel occurs. Let's not make the mistake to solve the current implementation stand-still, by un-doing step one (undermining the Eel Regulation) – that would create a set-back of decades. Let's move forward and fully implement the agreed protection, to fulfil our promise to the eel for a sustainable protection across its distribution area.



### The action to take

SEG now calls for:

- Evaluating achieved protection levels (the 2021 national assessments provide the basis for that),
- Improving the implementation of the Eel Regulation structurally within five years, and
- Reaching the agreed minimal protection in all countries within this decade (before 2030).



(Mother Eel, by Maready Evergreen)

**The young eels, that immigrated our rivers in spring 2020, deserve sustainable protection within their lifetime!**