

On the 11th of June 2022, Willem Dekker posted the following text on Facebook (and Twitter):

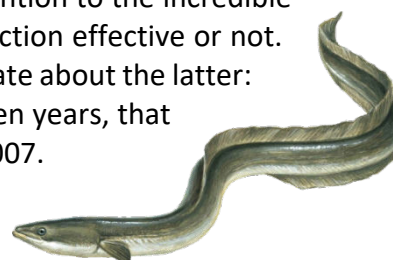
Hurray, hurray! A big congratulation to [EU Maritime & Fish](#): today is the fifteenth anniversary of the EU Eel Regulation. And a big congratulation to the [EU Commission DG-Environment \(DG-ENV\)](#) too, because this is also the fifteenth anniversary of the CITES listing of our eel. Two anniversaries on one sunny day. On June 11th, shortly after 09:00 – now exactly fifteen years ago – Europe adopted its essential two policies for protection and recovery of the dwindling European eel stock. A key event for the development of responsible management of this shared resource - I will elaborate on that here below.



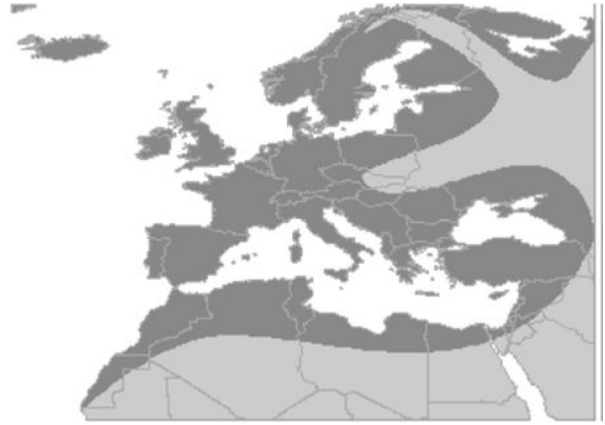
In 1857, the Conseil Général de la Vendée (Fr) reported that “*the eel stock is so abundant that absolutely nothing can make one fear for the decline of this stock*”. Well, those times are long gone, alas. In the one-and-half century since 1857, the world of the eel has changed completely: Open estuaries, unblocked rivers, free-flowing streams, undrained marshes – all of that is largely gone. Not to speak about pollution, eutrophication, acidification, hydropower-generation. Changed forever. And hence, the eel stock declined tremendously – to something like a few percent or less.

Those 150 years since 1857, there were a few intermittent reports describing the decline of the eel stock – but not much was done to prevent further deterioration. Modernization kept the fisheries going for a long time (it is only after 1960, that international catches went down, at circa 5% per year), and market developments made prices rise. Actually, the glass eel recruitment crash (15% down per year across Europe) - which dominates our thinking now - is just very recent (1980-2011). For the long century of stock decline, that glass eel recruitment had remained remarkably stable.

*Houston, we have an Eel Problem.* While many things about eel still remain a mystery, the stock itself is in a very long-lasting decline. Do we address those mysteries first - or do we find a way to protect and restore the stock, despite all the mysteries? As unbelievable as it might sound, the mysteries usually won – and they still do: it is easier to draw attention to the incredible Sargasso Sea story, than to a discussion of what makes eel protection effective or not. In the early 1990s, I finally managed to initiate a more lasting debate about the latter: how to protect the stock, despite the many mysteries. After fifteen years, that debate has eventually created the basis for the EU decisions in 2007.



The eel stock is distributed over almost all of Europe and the Mediterranean – in just a single biological population. Hence, the centennial decline of the stock is our shared problem, which none of us can solve on his/her own. We depend on each other.



For a century, one has primarily pursued technical solutions for the Eel Problem, and tried to compensate, rather than to stop or mitigate the decline – without much effect.

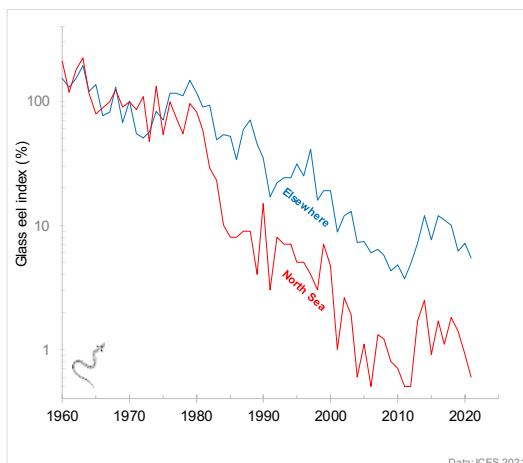
In the early 2000s, fishing restrictions (closing fisheries) and other simple measures were considered, but not any single measure fitted all circumstances, and a simple “closing fisheries” would just stimulate illegal practices. There is no feasible “one size fits all” to protect the eel across the continent. So we need to respect our differences (between countries, between habitats), and adapt the protective measures to that. *In varietate concordia*.

Today’s anniversary Regulation made a fundamental break-through in two ways: 1. Chopping up the huge international problem into manageable, national chunks (distribute control), and 2. Making the national governments responsible for an adequate, locally adapted protection (subsidiarity, thus avoiding the unproductive one-size-fits-all) under international coordination. Effectively, the Eel Regulation brought the EU house in order for the eel, and the CITES listing then added to that by “closing the back-door”. Doors closed, unwanted exports (legal or illegal) would not disrupt the EU-internal protection efforts.



The Eel Regulation and CITES listing were adopted in 2007, implemented around 2010. At that time, many protective measures were taken, all over Europe. Remarkably, the 30-year decline in glass eel recruitment then halted after 2011. To be honest: I had hoped for this, but truly not expected such to happen anymore.

A significant good start of eel protection, a first success – and then, a kind of eel-fatigue crept in. Following the initial successful years, most countries froze their actions, scientific evaluations did not provide effective feedback, and the eel policies thus remained half-baked.



The recruitment of young eel has stabilized since 2011, but not truly recovered. The adult escapement target (40%, the long-term target of the Eel Regulation) is achieved in not many areas. Have we failed? Well, manage your expectations: neither the recruitment, nor the escapement could have truly recovered, as long as we have not reached the minimal protection agreed in the Eel Regulation, in 2007. So yes, we failed – but not so much in the outcome for the eel, more in our own efforts to create the necessary conditions. We can do better.



On this Anniversary of the EU Eel policies, I think of the long century of ignorance and problem denial of before. And I think of the long and hectic period after 1991, to create public awareness on the bad status of the eel stock and to build up adequate action (eventually in 2007). So on this sunny June 11th, let's celebrate the Eel Regulation and CITES listing, and let's bake them off tomorrow.

To whom does this concern? Well: to whom not? The eel occurs all over Europe, and the quality of our freshwater is a concern for us all. [EU Maritime & Fish](#) [EU Commission DG-Environment \(DG-ENV\)](#) [CITES Sustainable Eel Group](#) [WWF](#) [Viswijzer RAVON](#) [Aalherstel - Paling terug in Nederland](#) [FishSec - The Fisheries Secretariat](#) [CCB - Coalition Clean Baltic](#) [DUPAN](#) [EelTown.org](#) - a community for catadromous (Anguillid) eel enthusiasts - and whoever I forgot. [#EelRegulation](#) [#EelCites](#)



Uitgeest (NL), 2022-Jun-11, at 09:00 in the morning, Willem Dekker  
For the original Facebook posts, and the reactions to it, see this [link](#).