

Certifying eel fisheries in a multi-actor environment

Purpose

This summarises how the SEG standard integrates with and supports the European Council (EC) Eel Regulation 2007/1100, and why it is needed for the commercial sector for the European eel.

The European eel problem

The ‘Eel Problem’ is complex, and there is no easy one-size-fits-all-solution for its management. The stock reaches from the North Cape to the Nile Delta (almost all EU Member States, and many neighbouring countries), inhabiting almost all waters in between. Many countries are involved in managing this shared stock, crossing many jurisdictions, addressing many policies and cultures. Habitats vary from open marine areas, through main rivers and large lakes, down to the smallest ditch and mountain stream. In arid systems, in subtropical areas with major desertification, through temperate regions full of heavily modified water courses, up to the wild waters where hydropower stations are built to produce renewable energy. The ‘Eel Problem’ encompasses this all.

Decline of the eel stock

The decline of the eel stock over the last century (or more) likely relates to habitat loss (land reclamation), blocked migration routes (water management), overfishing (on all life stages), pollution of many kinds (water pollution, agricultural run-off), and possibly many other man-made factors. There are thousands of professional fishers, millions of recreational fishers, many millions of people living in reclaimed habitats, and even more of us depending on good water management – and each and every one of them makes some sort of an impact on the eel stock. That is what is called a multi-actor system. Millions of people with an impact, and that impact varies from direct and deliberate fishing, to very indirect impacts (run-off from inhabited areas); from permanent impacts that can be reduced or reversed, to totally irreversible impacts such as loss of habitats and water management.

A multi-factored decline, necessarily addressed in a multi-actor environment, over a vast geographical extension.

The Eel Regulation

The EC Eel Regulation (2007) effectively integrates a range of policies, including the Common Fisheries Policy, the Water Framework Directive, the Habitats Directive, and more – and adds its own, eel-specific aspects. The aim of the Eel Regulation is to protect and recover the depleted stock, and to achieve a sustainable fishery. To achieve an effective protection and recovery of the eel stock, all relevant factors and actors need to be addressed, in all areas, establishing a stable and sustainable management regime over a long range of years. To this end, the Eel Regulation sets an objective: to lower human mortalities on the stock to a level that will enable recovery to historical abundance levels, to 40% of the notional pristine stock. This conforms to a net survival of minimal 40% (relative to notional pristine conditions).

The role of the Sustainable Eel Group (SEG) standard

It is in this overly complex setting, that the Sustainable Eel Group took the initiative (in 2011) to develop a standard for a responsible eel fishing sector. This Code of Conduct is available to (regional groups of) individual fishers, traders, processors and aquaculturists. This code sets minimal conditions for a responsible exploitation, contributing to the implementation of the national Eel Management Plans and the EU Eel Regulation. However, given that the SEG standard addresses only the commercial fishing sector, it does not address all factors and all actors involved in eel management: issues related to water management, pollution, wildlife management, and loss of (accessibility to) habitats are not primarily aimed at.

The SEG standard deliberately addresses a single type of actor (exploitation-related) in a multi-actor environment, a single factor (fisheries) in a multi-factor process.

The impact of the standard

Addressing only the commercial fishing sector, this implies that conditions can be set for their actions and impacts, but not for the resulting state of the stock. After all, any of the other actors and any of the other factors will also have an influence. Hence, the SEG standard requires applicants to adhere to best practices (avoid unnecessary mortality or quality loss), and to abide to the law – in particular: to abide to the relevant Eel Management Plan and the EU Eel Regulation, aiming for protection and recovery of the stock.

Application of the SEG Standard by itself, however, does not guarantee to achieve adequate protection, a sustainable fishery or recovery – on its own; the commercial sector is not able to achieve these shared objectives. While contributing to the shared objectives as a responsible actor, the certified commercial sector cannot be held responsible for the net outcome as influenced by all parties. It is only in the national Eel Management Plan and the EC Eel Regulation, that all factors and all actors can be addressed, and therefore, it is only at this level that the net outcome can be evaluated.

It goes without saying that the SEG standard expects the responsible sector to contribute loyally to this outcome evaluation, and to live up to potential consequences.