

The European Eel

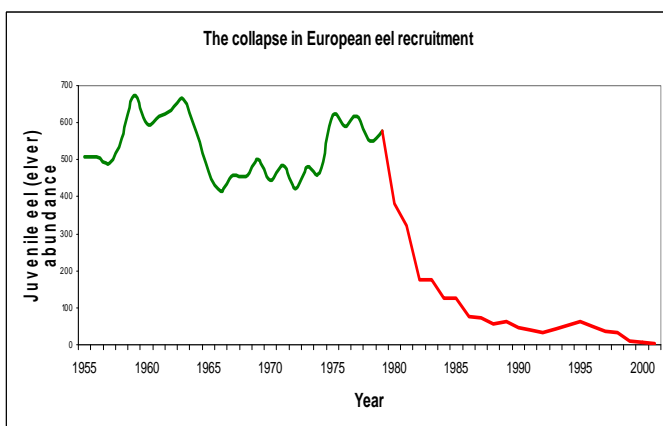
Factsheet 1

The Plight of Eel

The European eel (*Anguilla anguilla*) is distributed throughout European estuarine and inland waters, from Scandinavia to North Africa. This migratory species spends most of its life cycle in European freshwater or coastal waters, but is thought to spawn in the Sargasso Sea. The leaf-like leptocephalus larvae drift on ocean currents, returning to the European coast up to a year later. As glass eels, they enter estuaries and migrate upstream as elvers. They take residence in rivers and stillwaters, and develop into yellow eel. Between approximately 6 and 20 years later the yellow eel mature into adult silver eel, before migrating downstream and making the return journey to the west Atlantic to complete their complex life cycle.

What is happening to the European Eel?

The European Eel has experienced a population collapse in the last 30 years. The number of elvers (young eels) migrating into European rivers has fallen to less than 5% of 1980s levels. This decline has put the European Eel on the endangered list and made it the subject of new European legislation.



In England and Wales, elver numbers have fallen by an estimated 70%, compared with historic (pre-1980s) levels.

Causes of the Decline in Eel Populations

We do not know why there has been this dramatic decline in the elver population. It is likely to be a combination of factors including climate change, habitat loss and obstruction of waterways. We know very little about the marine stage of the eel's lifecycle.

European Union Regulation

The EU Eel Regulation requires Member States to prepare and implement Eel Management Plans in order to achieve an increase in the numbers of adult (silver) eels returning to sea. Under this legislation the UK government has a target to increase the quantity of returning silver eel populations to 40% of historic (pre 1980s) levels in the long term.



More information

Details of the UK's Eel Management Plans can be found at -
<http://www.defra.gov.uk/foodfarm/fisheries/freshwater/elmp.htm>.

The latest international advice on eel stocks can be found at -
<http://www.ices.dk/committe/acom/comwork/report/2009/2009/eel-eur.pdf>.

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