

# The European Eel

## Factsheet 5

### The Eel - Interesting facts and figures

The eel has fascinating historical significance:

- the Victorians believed that they were spontaneously created;
- there is a Greek God in the shape of an eel;
- Pliny, the Roman historian and naturalist, thought elvers grew from horsehairs that were accidentally dropped into the water.

Eel have a long-range lifecycle:

- They spawn in the mid-Atlantic Ocean and their transparent larvae drift on ocean currents until they reach the continental shelf.
- As they approach the coast, they grow and take on a darker colour.
- Now called elvers, they enter estuaries and migrate upstream to grow and mature in rivers, lakes, ponds and wetlands.
- As yellow eel, they can remain in freshwater for over 20 (and up to 40) years, before migrating downstream, taking on a silver appearance, to the sea.
- The mature silver eel adults are thought to migrate back to the mid-Atlantic to spawn. Truly one of nature's great migrants that we still do not fully understand.



Eel are found across the north Atlantic, from north America, across northern Europe to the Mediterranean.

Eel fisheries are the most widespread in the north Atlantic area and support over 25,000 fishers. In England and Wales, around 900 people fish for eel by net and traps.

Eel are an important part of the diet of several other rare and protected species, such as otters and bittern.

Eel have recently been added to the UK Biodiversity Action Plan and listed as endangered by the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES).



When an elver pass was first installed on the River Parrett in Somerset, it was being used by elvers 15 minutes after the water had been turned on! You can see the pass in operation on YouTube - [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kh\\_bet7uelg](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kh_bet7uelg):

As a result of falling populations, wholesale prices of elver (a delicacy in Europe) have increased from 50p per kg in the 1980s to £500 per kg on today's market. There are around 3000 elvers in a kilo.

Over one third of all elver caught in Europe are required to be used for restocking rivers.

Sigmund Freud spent four weeks at the Austrian zoological research station dissecting hundreds of eels to search (unsuccessfully) for their male reproductive organs. Glamorous work if you can get it!

### More information

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