

# Protecting eels: the need for action

**The European eel is in danger. The quantity of juvenile eels recently plummeted to as low as only 1% of historic levels. The Commission has proposed measures aimed at developing long-term management to help rebuild the stock.**

**The** International Council for Exploration of the Sea (ICES) concludes in its latest report: *“Eel stock is almost certainly below what would be considered as safe biological limits.”* Understanding the dangers threatening this species requires a look at its very specific life cycle.

All eels are born in the Sargasso Sea, in the middle of the North Atlantic. The Gulf Stream carries the larvae to Europe and North Africa. Feeding along shores and in estuaries, they grow into *elvers*, or young eels. After migrating upstream, they settle into the calm waters of rivers, ponds and streams where they become *yellow eels*, or adults. Around 10 years later, they develop into *silver eels*. At that point, they migrate downstream and make the journey to the Sargasso Sea, where they spawn and die. It is throughout the freshwater cycle that eels encounter multiple dangers.

First, there is intense fishing pressure on all eel populations, from elvers to silver eels. And because the species does not reproduce in captivity, wild stocks (especially elver) are used to supply aquaculture.

Both at sea and in freshwaters, eels are also victims of shrinking natural habitats and pollution. When migrating both upstream and downstream, their progress through waterways is hindered by numerous man-made obstacles such as dykes and dams, and there is a high mortality rate among the adult eels making their way to spawning grounds.

All this explains that measures to protect eels have to encompass both coastal zones for juveniles and inland waterways for adults.

After numerous consultations with scientists, representatives of the sector and Member States, the Commission proposed in October last a regulation introducing recovery measures for the European eel stock. This proposal follows on from the action plan the Commission presented in 2003 (see *Fishing in Europe* No 24, December 2004, pp 9-10).

## National management plans

First of all, the draft regulation sets a common objective for the migration of adult eels to the sea for spawning: the *“escapement”* rate for each river basin must be 40% of the number of adult eels that would migrate to the sea under ideal natural conditions, namely in the absence of obstacles to migration, pollution and fisheries.

Due to the variety of habitats and types of eel fishing in the different river basins, measures cannot be identical for all regions. It will therefore be up to the Member States to take adequate measures to attain this objective, such as limiting fishing activity or reducing the different obstacles to migration by restoring habitats, cleaning up polluted areas and installing fish ladders along dams.

Each river basin would have a specific *management plan*. In the basins that extend beyond the boundaries of a single State, such as the Rhine, the Meuse, the Douro or the Tagus, the management plans must be agreed between the different States concerned.

The plans would have to be submitted to the Commission by the end of 2006. After a careful review and approval by the Scientific, Technical and Economic Committee for Fisheries (STECF), they would enter into force on 1 July 2007. The Commission is also considering proposing other measures for the longer term, such as the introduction of a traceability system to prevent fraud or a study of ways to increase the quantity of elver that can be used to improve and conserve the stock.

## A temporary protection measure

The draft regulation proposes a short-term protection measure until the national management plans have been approved by the Commission and put into place: the closure of all eel fisheries from the 1<sup>st</sup> to the 15<sup>th</sup> of every month. Fishing could continue during the closure period in the Member States that have demonstrated that their measures guarantee the 40% escapement rate. Fishing for elver could also continue if these are used to restock rivers but not for aquaculture. The Commission's proposal has to be approved by Parliament and the Council during 2006 to take effect.