



## European eel – effective measures for recovery

ICES Advice for the European eel throughout its natural range, [published 4 November 2021](#), states: “*there should be zero catches in all habitats in 2022. This applies to both recreational and commercial catches and includes catches of glass eels for restocking and aquaculture. All other anthropogenic mortalities should be minimized and eliminated where possible*”.

With no real new scientific facts this differs markedly from previous years, where ICES advised that: ***all anthropogenic impacts that decrease production and escapement of silver eels should be reduced to, or kept as close as possible to, zero.***”

The latest advice, wrongly in LIFE’s view, makes fishing the focus of effective conservation measures, ahead of reducing other more important anthropogenic mortalities as well as predation.

Fishing for adult eels at sea represents only 3% of the total mortality,<sup>1</sup> and LIFE contends that there are more benefits than risks to be gained by keeping this part of the eel fishery open.

The commercial fishery has led efforts to aid eel escapement by severely reducing fishing mortality. Now, efforts need to be focused on minimising all other mortalities – taking into account both conservation and socio-economic considerations.

LIFE has recommended [a plan](#) for saving the European eel, based on keeping the fishery open with a seasonal closure decided by Member States including the follow points:

- Introduction of an all-encompassing Catch Documentation Scheme for European eel – for all stages of its life cycle, including catches of leisure fishermen, anglers and a traceability scheme on all stages of trade

In order to combat the illegal trade and secure all landings of eel are documented we recommend that Member States implement a scheme for documenting catches. This could, for example, be modelled on the salmon fishery in Finland. Every caught eel is tagged or marked - stating who caught it and where. Tags are attached to each license and use of them is mandatory throughout the supply chain.

- Increase efforts to curb the illicit capture, trade and trafficking of eels

[According to Europol](#) “estimates show that the trafficking of eels is now 50 % lower than in 2016, the year after Operation Lake was launched.” This represents hundreds of millions of glass eels that have not been poached and will contribute to the adult eel population in the years to come. Moreover, we welcome the inclusion of European eel in the scope of the SCIPs

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<sup>1</sup> [Pedersen MI , Rasmussen GH. Fisheries regulation on European Eel \(Anguilla anguilla\) for 2018; how big is the effect? J Fish Res 2018;2\(1\):2.](#)



(Specific Control and Inspection Programmes) and the JDPs (Joint Deployment Programmes) and agree that this should include control of the eel fisheries closures.

- Facilitate eel migration by enhancing fluvial continuity from source to sea – including through “smart measures” based on eel migratory habits

We support the BSAC proposal that Member States, as part of commitments made in HELCOM, requirements stemming from the EU eel recovery regulation and the Water Framework Directive, establish a five-year plan on how to address eel conservation in the most important water bodies, with a set target of at least 90% survival of eel escaping to the sea.

- Reserve the glass eel fishery for restocking purposes only

The socio-economic value of restocking is clear and at this time, in particular, is of critical importance given restricted access to other fish. Restocking has been a tradition for more than a century, supporting jobs and sustaining cultural heritage. The environmental benefits of restocking have proved inconclusive as a conservation measure, but a Catch Documentation Scheme would aid our knowledge of the relationship between restocking and spawning. ICES states that “the net benefit of restocking eels to reproductive potential of the stock is unknown”.

As part of our work within the Baltic Sea Advisory Council, we have worked together with other stakeholders to form a [consensus statement](#) that has support across the region.

The Council Regulation establishing measures for the recovery of the stock of European eel has been in place since 2007 ([EC 2007/1100](#)). We note significant deficiencies in the implementation of this Regulation in Member States and welcome the ICES report on the implementation of Member State national eel management plans, due in April.

The eel has a generation cycle of around 15 years which means that a quick fix in helping the recovery of eel is not possible. However, we note that there has been no measured deterioration in the state of the eel stocks in recent years and highlight that much can be done to assist the eel through different stages of its life cycle while still maintaining the commercial fishery.

Eel stocks have been in decline for over a century, and they are now only about 10% of historic levels. Many factors have contributed to the decline: loss of wetland habitat, pollution, water-management blocking migration pathways, increase in cormorant populations, unscreened water pumps and hydropower stations, over-exploitation and illegal trafficking.

Closing down the commercial fishery would have the likely unintended consequence of making the shared goal of improving the state of the eel stocks harder to achieve in reality, while also reducing the quality of comparable data available to scientists monitoring eel migration together with fishers.

Commercial fishermen have taken a disproportionate share of responsibility for minimising mortality on silver eel. To ensure the survival of the eel, there is a need for a more even spread



of responsibility with a fairer share of the burden for rebuilding the stock on those who do the most damage.

In LIFE's view, it is possible to save both the eel and the livelihoods of small-scale fishers whose livelihoods depend on it. Better implementing the eel regulation will influence the future status of the eel more than any other measure. Closing the fishery would be the death of the fishers, already hard hit by other closures.

We ask the Commission, Member States and stakeholders to support the following:

- Not to impose any more restrictions on the saltwater marine fisheries. Marine fisheries have delivered their part in implementing the eel regulation
- The timing of the closed period for fishing should be a Member State decision
- Stop the illegal trade and fishing of eel
- Implement the eel regulation
- Reduce eel mortality where mortality is highest