



Glass Eels Deserve Protection

Tiny but Key

Glass eels, the juvenile form of the Atlantic eel, serve a crucial role in the aquatic ecosystem. Despite being tiny, transparent, and almost impossible to spot in the water by an untrained eye, they're a key component of Long Island Sound's food web, particularly for larger fish and migratory birds. Glass eels are also important to commercial and recreational anglers—while eels themselves aren't typically caught in the US, bluefish and striped bass depend on eels for survival.



Releasing a young American eel into Alewife Cove in Groton, CT.

In Need of Protection

Both adult and juvenile American eels face serious threats: overfishing to supply a market for eels in Asia, dams that block their migration, and environmental factors like climate change. They're at such risk that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is currently considering putting them on the Endangered Species List.

A law passed by the Connecticut legislature earlier this year could have opened a fishery for glass eels in Connecticut. Governor Malloy vetoed the bill, but this close call underscored the necessity of stronger protections for glass eels.

The Atlantic Marine Fisheries Commission must institute a strong, science-based management plan to restore the Northeast's American eel population. The plan must protect glass eels so they're abundant enough to fill their ecosystem niche of feeding larger species and still have enough to mature into adults and sustain the population.

Advances like "eel-a-vators" (right) provide paths past dams to help glass eels complete their migratory journey safely. These eel passes provide eels with a damp, rough surface and use eels' desire to swim against the current by flowing water down the ramp. (Photo: Robert Lorenz)



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Glass Eel Talking Points

The Threats

Overfishing is the biggest threat to American eels. Smoked eel is prized in Asian markets, and eels already have been drastically overfished in Asia. Dealers now purchase glass eels from the United States instead, where they fetched the high price of \$2,600 per pound in 2012. They're then flown overseas and farmed to market size. Connecticut does not currently allow taking of glass eels, but the legislature considered opening a glass eel season earlier this year.



Glass eels captured for study.
(Photo: Robert Lorenz)

Other threats to eels include:

- Dams that block their passage upriver
- Turbines in hydroelectric dams that kill mature eels on their way back downstream
- Heavy metal poisons in the environment, which can accumulate behind dams
- Climate change that will likely move global ocean currents and disrupt the eels' migration patterns
- Parasites, which may also increase with the warming waters of climate change

A Marvel of Migration

Glass eels begin their lives in the ocean, drifting along currents in the Sargasso Sea. Each spring, huge numbers come up the Atlantic coastline. They navigate upstream past dams as the water warms in April and May. After living in fresh water for a couple of decades, the eels return to the Sargasso Sea to spawn and die.

Protections for glass eels are important because so many of them don't survive to adulthood that there are comparatively few remaining to perpetuate the species. Eels take decades to mature and a female eel can lay up to 30 million eggs, so protecting even a single adult can make a difference.

Open migratory paths up rivers and streams is crucial for the eels' survival, and conservation groups and the state of Connecticut have already spent significant money to open up passages and remove dams throughout the state. We don't want this investment to be wasted!



A released eel returning to Alewife Cove in Groton, CT.

Save the Sound

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