

Backgrounder: press release SEG 09-03-2018

Why European eels are being trafficked to Asia

This year's fishing season for glass eels, the young ones that have just arrived on the Ocean currents, has a tragic twist to its tail.

The glass eel once grown on is a great delicacy and the largest markets are Japan, China and South Korea. Each year some hundred tons is needed by farmers to grow them on in fish ponds to satisfy the demand for 'unagi kabayaki'. This food passion was historically met from the local stock called *Anguilla Japonica* and then supplemented with purchases from elsewhere notably the USA, with the North American Eel and European eel from the EU and North Africa.

Northern hemisphere species - American, Japanese and European eel - are in massive decline and have been IUCN listed as endangered (American and Japanese) and critically endangered (European eel). The European eels is furthermore listed in CITES Appendix II and the EU banned the imports- and export since 2010. Efforts to protect and promote recovery are underway in Europe and North America - not only with the obvious actions like attempting to control the fishery but also environmental actions like unblocking migration pathways, screening hydropower intakes and restoring wetlands.

Asian fishing authorities have failed to adequately protect the Japanese stock which has in 2018 tumbled to a near total collapse – so far only a few tons have been caught compared with a typical 15 to 30 ton. Unsurprisingly prices have sky rocketed and Asian buyers are active in France, Spain, Portugal, UK, North Africa and North America. A ton contains 3 to 4 million eels and is worth its weight in gold perhaps £5m. One year later once the fish have been grown on the figure rises 10 fold so [astronomical profits are made](#).

INTERPOL and EUROPOL have started to work closely as gangs seek to profit from this multi- billion-dollar business. In the last 12 months, 5 people have been imprisoned in USA whereas here in Europe, so far, only small fines and suspended prison sentences have been served.

In summary, the Europe Union's programme, including its Eel Regulation, to save the eel is faltering through its failure to stop the trafficking.