

Note for Deutscher Fischerei-Verband, Eel Conference April 25, 2013

The European eel (*Anguilla Anguilla*) belongs to just one single stock. It is in fact quite symbolical as an EU management issue, since this single stock species has its distribution area all over Europe. And eels live not only in the sea - but also in freshwater lakes.

All European eels are born in the same place - in the Sargasso Sea. This is 5 000 kilometres away from the Baltic Sea - in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean. They spawn only once in their lives; after that they die. The eel larvae then move with the help of the Gulf Stream to European coasts. Some end up in Northern Europe, some in Southern. The journey takes them at least three years. When they arrive they have developed to glass eels, then they go from the elver stage to yellow eels when they migrate into fresh water. In Northern Europe they stay in fresh water for many years - maybe 10 - 20 or 30 years. Eels can become very old. The oldest one on record lived in a tank for 84 years.

Then the yellow eel metamorphoses again - into a silver eel, and begins its journey back to the Sargasso Sea where it was born. From the Baltic it swims for some 5 000 kilometres before it reproduces at unknown depths and then it dies. And then - hopefully - new larvae will start their journey back to Europe again.

This is an absolutely fascinating life cycle that has to be explained and understood each time we are going to discuss the management of eel fisheries. Because if we don't understand this life cycle we cannot understand why we need a common European Eel recovery plan at all - and secondly we will not really understand what it means that, according to ICES latest assessment (November 2012), glass eel recruitment in Europe has diminished by more than 99 per cent in the North Sea compared to the years 1960 - 1979.

The recruitment index is presently, according to ICES "at its historical lowest" - a dramatic decline that started around the year 1980.

The EU has discussed the eel problem for many years. Already in 2003 the Commission proposed measures that were opposed by some member states that found it unfair that it would affect some fisheries more than others. This situation, with fisheries interests on all life stages of the European eel in almost all EU countries (and some non-EU countries!) postponed any EU measures even more. Not until 2008 we saw an agreement on a joint Recovery plan of the European eel - and while the plan has been discussed, agreed and implemented the glass and yellow eel recruitment indexes have continued to fall.

This is of course an extremely worrying situation. All the more worrying it becomes, knowing that even if the target set out in the Eel recovery plan is reached, and all the measures allowed for in the regulation are implemented there is not any scientifically solid ground to say that the European eel would recover - or even prevent extinction.

Why?

First of all, the target set out in the plan (40 % escapement of silver eels as compared to a pristine state with no human induced mortality at all) has never been approved by ICES. Secondly the EU regulation lists restocking as one option to achieve stock

recovery - which is not consistent with ICES advice (1999, 2001, 2005, 2008, 2011). In the 2011 advice ICES starts by stating that "*urgent action is needed*" and that "*anthropogenic mortality needs to be reduced to as close to zero as possible*" and then immediately elevates the problem with restocking, that has become such an important measure in many of the Member States recovery plans:

"Given the current record-low abundance of glass eels, ICES reiterates its concern that glass eel stocking programmes are unlikely to contribute to the recovery of the European eel stock in a substantial manner. The overall burden of proof should be that stocking will generate net benefits, in terms of contributions to silver eel escapement and spawning potential. Prior to stocking, or for continuing existing stocking, a risk assessment should be conducted, taking into account fishing, holding, transport, post-stocking mortalities, and other factors such as disease and parasite transfers. To facilitate stock recovery all catches of glass eel should be used for stocking. Stocking should take place only where survival to the silver eel stage is expected to be high and escapement conditions are good. This means that stocking should not be used to continue fishing and stocking should only take place where all anthropogenic mortalities are low.

So, what ICES is high-lighting is that restocking is taking place without any of the conditions mentioned being met. There is no guarantee that there is a surplus of eels to be caught, there are no rules on methods of catch and therefore the mortality during the fisheries is high and basically stocking can be conducted in order to supply eel fishermen - which does not contribute to the eel recovery. Other concerns by ICES regard how stocking may disrupt migration patterns - i e if an eel that was caught in the Bay of Biscay and then translocated to the Baltic Sea does find its way back to the Sargasso sea to spawn? There is no real evidence that this is the case.

Adding to these concerns are the suspicions of an illegal trade of glass eels from the EU (since 2007 the European eel was listed on the CITES list which prohibits any exports of endangered animals). Recent figures, comparing official landing data and Eurostat data do not match, and ICES are estimating almost 20 tonnes of glass eels caught in Spain and France being unaccounted for. Also in this case you might argue that a glass eel fishery for restocking is being used as a cover-up for glass eel fisheries that are destined at an Asian market where they can be sold for some 600 euros a kilo.

With this as a background, particularly the fact that the implementation of the EU Eel recovery plans have led to a substantial increase of restocking, and the landings of glass eels have increased in the years 2010 and 2011, has led me as a rapporteur of the Eel recovery plan to - although the plan is only subject to a legal adjustment to be in line with the Lisbon Treaty and not really up to revision yet - propose some substantial changes to the plan. As ICES stated in its latest advice: Urgent action is needed!

More about the concrete measures can be found in the report itself.

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