

## WANTED

### Information about Eels Caught in the Ottawa River

The Ministry of Natural Resources is trying to determine the extent and health of the eel population in the Lac des Chats section of the Ottawa River. Populations of the American eel in Ontario are dwindling and the province is looking at putting the fish on the list of endangered species.

American eels (*Anguilla rostrata*) have been swimming up the Ottawa River since long before European settlers first came to this area. The American eel is a unique species of fish found in fresh-water rivers and lakes from the Gulf of Mexico to Labrador, including the St. Lawrence River system, the lower Great Lakes and the lower sections of the Ottawa River. These snake-like fish belong to a single breeding population with a fascinating life cycle that takes them from the Caribbean to the inland waters of North America and back to the Caribbean. Like salmon, eels spend part of their lives in fresh water and part in salt water. But where salmon head for fresh-water rivers to spawn, eels do the opposite—they live most of their adult lives in fresh-water and return to the ocean to spawn.

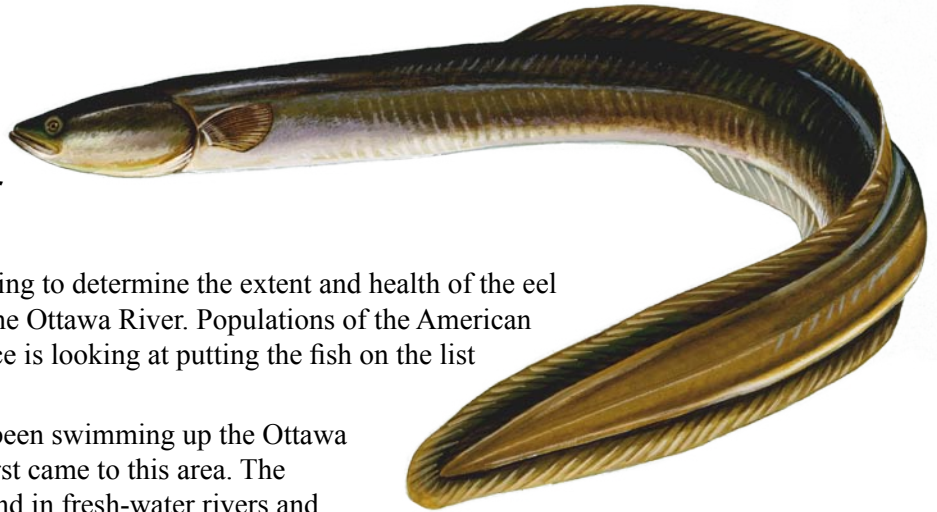
Historically, eels would probably have been found deep into the upper reaches of Renfrew County river systems such as the Madawaska, and well up the main channel of the Ottawa but dams constructed many years ago have limited the migration of these fish into some historic habitat.

One thing is certain—eels are still making up the Ottawa River at least as far as Lac des Chats, which is a lake-like section of the river between the Chats Falls Dam below Arnprior and the Chenaux Dam at Portage du Fort.

MNR fisheries staff are trying to learn more about the size and health of this population of eels, and determine if there is critical habitat that needs to be protected.

### Protected Species

The American eel is a protected species in Ontario and an important part of aquatic ecosystems in our waterways. One of the things working against this species is the attitude of some anglers who think of eels as vermin and kill them when they catch them. This attitude needs to change.



The American eel is an important part of the diversity of life in Ontario waterways such as the St. Lawrence River system, the lower Great Lakes and the lower sections of the Ottawa River and is a valuable indicator of the health of the ecosystem. The species has been in serious decline since the mid-1990s and is at risk of disappearing from many areas of its current habitat.

## The Life Cycle of the American Eel

- The spawning of the American eel has never been observed, but is believed to take place at depths of 600 metres in the western part of the Sargasso Sea, a region in the north Atlantic near the islands of the Bahamas and Bermuda.
- The young eels start their migration as transparent larvae only 10 to 20 millimeters (mm) long. They swim and drift with ocean currents from the Sargasso Sea along the east coast of North America to rivers along the Atlantic coast, including the St. Lawrence River.
- Eels will generally feed for 10 to 15 years before migrating back to the Sargasso Sea to spawn. At this stage, their yellowish or olive-brown colour develops a metallic sheen and they are known as silver eels.
- The average age of eels migrating down the St. Lawrence River is 20 years, but two fish caught in Lake Superior were 38 and 42 years old. Most eels weigh between one and three kilograms and are 75 to 120 cm long, but larger specimens weighing more than seven kilograms have been recorded.
- The eels don't feed during their journey back to their birthplace in the Sargasso Sea, which can take several months. After a round trip lasting several decades and thousands of kilometers, the eels' life cycle is completed when they spawn and die.



Young eels leave the Sargasso Sea and migrate up fresh-water rivers in North America where they live most of their adult lives before returning to the Caribbean to spawn. Hydroelectric dams in particular have hindered the migration of eels in our waterways, both upstream and downstream.

## Protection Efforts

- The decline of the American eel is due mostly to human activity, including commercial fishing and changes to eel habitat. Hydroelectric dams in particular have hindered the migration of eels both upstream and downstream.
- The American eel is being considered for endangered species designation in Ontario, at the national level in Canada and in the United States.

## You Can Help

Anglers who catch eels in the Lac des Chats section of the Ottawa River, or anywhere upstream of this section, either in the main channel of the Ottawa or in any of its tributaries such as the Madawaska or Bonnechere Rivers are asked to record as much information as possible before releasing it, such as:

- weight, length, girth
- location (GPS if you have it, or approximate location using local landmarks)
- depth of water and bottom type
- bait or lure type
- time of day

Note, there is no season on American eels in the Ottawa River, so any eels caught must be released.

### **If you catch an eel please contact:**

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