

# Eels in Inishowen



Learn more about eels in Inishowen, distribution, decline and how we could help

Thomas Lawrence  
Mill River Conservation Association  
in collaboration with



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CRITICALLY  
ENDANGERED

## What can we do?

Eels are a key species in our aquatic ecosystems both in the ocean and in our rivers. Here are some ways we can help to protect them.

1. Report your sightings of eels - take photos and send them to the Trust or submit to the National Biodiversity Data Centre.
2. Learn more about the European eel in your area.
3. Help restore our rivers to a healthy condition and improve water quality.
4. Let us know about barriers on our rivers so that we can plan to overcome them (report to fisheries authority or the Trust).



Larval stages of the eel

This leaflet has been produced as part of a project to raise awareness of the European Eel *Anguilla anguilla* in Inishowen and has been kindly funded by Donegal ChangeMakers under their Seeds of Change Grant Scheme



[www.inishowenriverstrust.com](http://www.inishowenriverstrust.com)  
[inishowenriverstrust@gmail.com](mailto:inishowenriverstrust@gmail.com)  
Tel. 087 647 8183



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Illustration: Marina & Anna Luisa Durante

Company Reg. 587285 | RCN 20153106 | CHY 22625

# THE DECLINE OF THE EUROPEAN EEL

The European Eel, a fascinating and mysterious animal, faces many challenges in our world. Once believed to have made up over 50% of the world's biomass of fish, by the 1970's global eel populations are thought to have declined by 90%. We don't fully understand the reasons for the decline of eels but we know they face a number of threats, globally and in Inishowen.

## Threat 1: Habitat Loss

Habitat loss is a key threat to all biodiversity. For the eel this means the loss of areas in rivers in which they rest and hide, such as woody debris and the roots of old trees. Riverbank vegetation is important in regulating the temperature of the water. If the water gets too hot fish become stressed and there is less oxygen for them to breathe. Declining water quality and dredging of river beds are also impacting on the habitat and how the river system functions.



Claire Thompson

## Threat 2: Human Impact

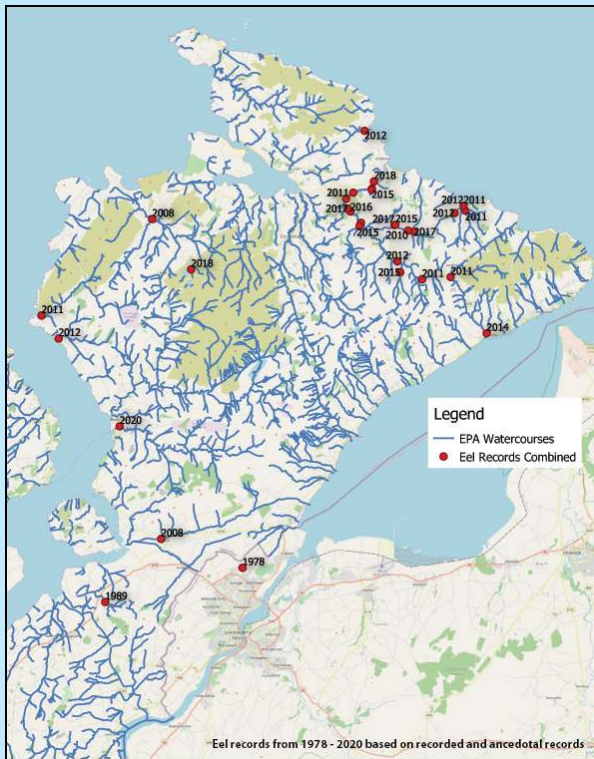
The construction of large dams and barriers have not only disrupted the migration of eels but have also been identified as a cause of death for significant numbers of this fish. Overfishing has a huge impact on elvers (also known as glass eels) which are considered a delicacy and attract high prices on the black market. Climate change and pollution are also affecting eels in the ocean.



European Eel - *Anguilla anguilla*

## Threat 3: Disease

There are a number of diseases that affect the European eel such as *Anguillid herpsevirus* which originally spread from Asia and Eel Virus European X (EVEX). Parasitic worms and nematodes, such as *Anguillicoloides crassus*, also impact the eel by affecting the swim bladder.



Eel records from 1978 - 2020 based on recorded and anecdotal records

There is little doubt that eels were widely distributed across Inishowen in the past but the population is now drastically reduced. The map above shows verified records from the Loughs Agency, North Regional Fisheries Board River Report, and communication with local anglers.

Eels begin their life in the Sargasso Sea, an area of the North Atlantic Ocean, and migrate to Europe over a period of approx 300 days. Once in European waters they metamorphose into elvers and enter our rivers and streams where they grow to be adults. Once mature they make a return migration across the Atlantic to breed just once in their lifetime. Eels can live up to 50 years, spending the majority of their lives in freshwater. A large adult can weigh as much as 6 kgs but are normally 2-4 kgs. All stages of the life cycle are secretive and with declining populations are now a rare sight in Inishowen.