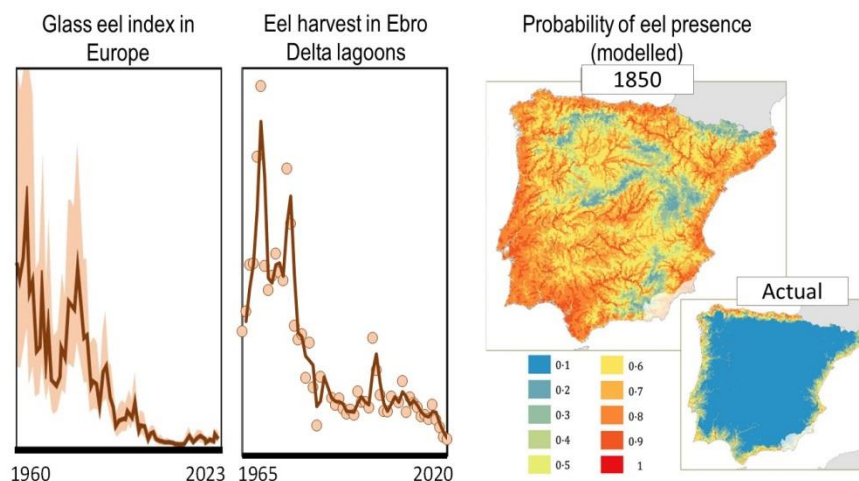




AVOID EEL EXTINCTION

The European eel (*Anguilla anguilla*) was an extraordinarily abundant fish in Europe and North Africa, where it was a keystone species of freshwater systems and one of their few species targeted by commercial fisheries. However, around 1980 started a collapse-like eel decline, involving abundance reductions that surpassed 90%. Declines were recorded in all life stages, from glass eels through yellow eels (typical freshwater inhabitants) and silver eels (mature individuals ready to start their migration to the Sargasso Sea). The abundance collapse was mirrored in the loss of range area. In the Iberian Peninsula eels were common in basically every water body up to elevations above 1000 masl, but within the last 100 years the species has disappeared from over 80% of its historical range.



IUCN's Red List, the global reference for the assessment of species' conservation statuses, classifies the European eel as a critically endangered species (CR). This is the most extreme threat category, the last one before extinction. The European eel is in fact more threatened than several species whose poor conservation status is widely acknowledged by the general public, such as the Spanish imperial eagle, the Iberian lynx, the giant panda or the mountain gorilla. Despite this, the eel is still fished, sold and eaten.

From 2007 the European Union has a unique single-species legislation that forces Member States to recover eel populations. However, the implementation of this legal obligation has not resulted in any noticeable improvement in the ever-worsening, critical situation of the species.

The International Council for the Exploration of the Sea (ICES), the main advisory body for North Atlantic fisheries, has a specific working group for eels (WGEEL), which issues yearly recommendations on eel exploitation. For more than 20 years (since 2000), this recommendation has been either avoiding catches or lowering them to levels "as close as

possible to zero". For both 2022 and 2023 the advice has been crystal clear: full ban, zero catches.

Any kind of commercial exploitation of eels is nowadays unsustainable. Against any logic, eels are not only still exploited. They have become luxury, highly desired items, with an ever-increasing price, offered to rich people as exclusive products. This generates an exploitation-rarity-price-demand vortex, already described for rhinos or sturgeons, which results in extinctions, if not stopped by external, non-market mechanisms.

On the other hand, and striking as it might be, in spite of the numerous regulations of European eel fisheries, the fishery-related mortality of the species has been barely reduced, if anything, in the last years. In fact, in some areas (including different Spanish autonomous regions) this mortality has augmented. With the decreasing arrival of glass eels, the impact of fisheries, always unsustainable, is increasing.

The cessation of the commercial activity around the European eel does not ensure its recovery, because several factors were involved in its collapse. But maintaining exploitation is in itself a guarantee that eel recovery will not occur.

Avoiding the extinction of the of the European eel requires **a total fishing ban**, which should embrace all sizes, all seasons, all habitats and all aims. The zero-catch target must also include **poaching control**, since eel trafficking, including, but not limited to, the European, is the largest wildlife crime worldwide. To dismantle the criminal organizations exploiting eels it is critical to discourage eel consumption globally. To that aim, **the commercialization of eel products of any kind must be banned**. Since basically all exploited *Anguilla* eels are highly threatened taxa, there are no possible substitutive sources to supply eel market demand.

Finally, it is necessary to **provide legal protection to the European eel**. In Spain this would imply including the eel in the Spanish Catalogue of Threatened Species, since it fulfils the criteria issued by the managing it (MITECO, Resolución de 6 de marzo de 2017).

**We must protect the eel
Now**

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