

<http://plymouth.wickedlocal.com/article/20140314/NEWS/140319132/0/SEARCH?template=printart>

By Frank Mand

March 14, 2014 2:00PM

GLASS EELING: Environmental officials fear surge of poachers

A tiny, translucent, vermicelli-like freshwater fish is sending shockwaves through the Maine economy, attracting poachers to Plymouth's historic brooks and streams, and compelling the town's environmental department to ask the public for help protecting this potentially endangered and, to many, delicious little creature.

PLYMOUTH – A tiny, translucent, vermicelli-like freshwater fish is sending shockwaves through the Maine economy, attracting poachers to Plymouth's historic brooks and streams, and compelling the town's environmental department to ask the public for help protecting this potentially endangered and, to many, delicious little creature.

We're talking about eels – specifically, the stage of development when, because of their diminutive size and translucent bodies, they are known as glass eels.

While not found in local waters in large numbers these days, there is a reason why the stream that flows into the land where the Harbor meets Long Beach was long ago named the Eel River.

Aristotle thought that eels were earthworms that had found their way to the sea, and for more than a thousand years their origin remained a mystery, full of half-truths and mythology. There are actually more than a dozen similar but distinct species of eels identified with spawning grounds in North America, Europe and, most importantly, Japan – which consumes more than two-thirds of the world's eel.

For centuries, local eels sufficed to meet the demands of local people all around the world but in the past decade over-fishing, disease and increasing demand – along with the damage to Japanese fisheries after the 2011 Fukushima disaster – have left the American variety (*Anguilla rostrata*) as one of the most plentiful – though authorities worry that may be changing – and, therefore, valuable species on the planet.

In 2013 in Maine a catch worth just less than \$39 million, representing 19,000 pounds of eels, was sold to fish brokers, most of whom represented Japanese interests. That works out roughly to a wholesale price of \$2,000 per pound.

At those prices it is not a surprise that Maine is struggling to manage its eel fishery.

Approximately 700 licenses were issued in 2013 to Maine residents, who averaged close to \$50,000 in earnings per license during what was just a two-month season.

Eel fishing has only recently become so lucrative. The price per pound fluctuated from around \$25 to \$2,000 in the last five years. But now that there's "gold in them thar streams" there are also a host of other issues to deal with.

Maine's wildlife authorities are concerned with over fishing, fighting unlicensed poachers, contesting the rights of Native Americans to issue their own licenses, and formulating new regulations that require seafood brokers to pay by check, instead of cash, as had been the practice in the past.

And, as Maine tightens up its control of eel fishing, poachers are turning their attention – and casting their nets – elsewhere.

Two years ago, as the price for eels began climbing, several Maine residents were arrested for trapping eels in Plymouth waters.

Last year on Town Brook and at other locations in Plymouth, town officials discovered carefully camouflaged nets attached to the bottoms of bridges and other structures. This year, because of new limitations and regulations in Maine, there could a corresponding increase in poaching in Massachusetts.

Make no mistake; there is no legal eel fishing season in Massachusetts.

Federal, state and local authorities have invested considerable sums in revitalizing Massachusetts fisheries that, over the last 200 years, have been negatively impacted by dams, pollution and development.

Massachusetts authorities want the glass eels that slither our way to stay. They can live 20 years or longer, and will remain in local fresh water streams and ponds until something inside them says its time to head back to their birthplace – the Sargasso Sea in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean – where they will spawn once and then die.

If you catch them before they enter local streams, they will never mature and never reproduce and, eventually, their numbers will dwindle to dangerous levels.

But Massachusetts eels do not come with a tag identifying their source. Authorities believe that poachers often take the eels they catch in Massachusetts to Maine, perhaps in cahoots with someone who holds a Maine eel-fishing license or to an unscrupulous seafood broker, and the sale is made.

And it doesn't take many eels to make many dollars. A pound of glass eels – 3,000 eels or more – could fit into a brown paper lunch bag. Oftentimes, these eels are destined for manmade ponds in Japan, where they are allowed to grow to maturity (up to three feet long), and are then sold to restaurants.

One pound of glass eels could, theoretically, generate more than a million dollars worth of Japanese sushi.



PHOTO/ PHOTO COURTESY PLYMOUTH DEPARTMENT OF MARINE AND ENVIRONMENTAL AFFAIRS

Poachers painted this fyke net black and placed it along the Town Brook late at night in order to avoid detection.

So, in the real world the possibility of pulling a few pounds of glass eels from Plymouths rivers and streams is enough to attract poachers from all over the region, and beyond, and enough for the town's Department of Marine and Environmental Affairs to call for your assistance.

"We need people to be aware of the situation and to report any suspicious activity," Harbormaster Chad Hunter told the Old Colony this week.

In one case, a local lobstermen saw a net stretched across the mouth of the Eel River.

"The person who told us said they noticed the net and took a picture with their phone. They said, 'Hey, are you guys doing any sampling or surveying?' They weren't suspicious at all," Hunter said.

In fact, this was a poacher brazenly using a net in open water to catch glass eels.

"They can be pretty crafty," Hunter said. "A net they placed at the Town Brook's entrance was painted black and carefully hidden. The only way you could see it is if you got in your waders and got down in the brook and looked up."

What town officials want you to do is report any suspicious activity, any unusual nets or equipment in the water, anyone lurking about the mouths of rivers or streams at odd hours, anything.

The eel season doesn't last all year. It begins in March and usually ends by Memorial Day. But in those two months thousands of pounds of glass eels will be caught, sold and shipped to Japan and elsewhere.

Hopefully, no Plymouth eels will be among them.

Follow Frank Mand on Twitter [@frankmandOCM](https://twitter.com/frankmandOCM)

Local environmental officials need your help to stop eel poaching in Plymouth

What town officials want you to do is simple: report any suspicious activity, any unusual nets or equipment in the water and anyone lurking about the mouths of rivers or streams at odd hours, anything. The eel season doesn't last all year. It begins in March and usually ends by Memorial Day. But in those two months thousands of pounds of glass eels will be caught, sold and shipped to Japan and elsewhere.

<http://plymouth.wickedlocal.com/article/20140314/NEWS/140319132>

Print Page