



Long-lining for brown eels has been a way of life since time immemorial

A slippery future for British eels

Managed by Father Kennedy, the Lough Neagh eel fishery is the biggest in Europe, exporting some 500 tonnes a year. But now the elvers are not coming home. By Johnny Scott. Photographs by Michael McKay

LOUGH NEAGH, Ulster's inland sea, is the third largest freshwater lake in Europe, covering an area of 400 square kilometres. The lough is filled by six major rivers but drained by only one, the Lower Bann, which carries water from the northern end to the sea at Portstewart. The mouth of the river, beside the village of Toomebridge, is spanned by a series of substantial box-shaped structures of wood and metal girders connected by walkways. These are the principal silver eel traps of the Lough

Neagh Fishermen's Co-operative Society, Europe's major commercial wild-eel fishery. The adjacent modern building, large and with an imposing pillared entrance, is the fishery headquarters, the hub of a highly successful community enterprise, presided over by its managing director, Father Oliver Kennedy.

The common eel, *Anguilla anguilla*, is a mysterious creature with a life cycle about which marine scientists are still not entirely certain. Mature eels of around 14 years begin

to change colour from olive-brown to silvery-black in autumn and, during the winter months, vacate their freshwater habitats to make for the sea. At this stage they are at least 50cm long and very plump. When they reach saltwater, their gut dissolves and energy from body fat alone must take them across 6,000km of ocean to spawning grounds, believed to be in the Sargosso Sea. Here in the vast, floating reedbeds south of Bermuda, eels that have survived the journey mate, spawn and die.

Over the following three years, millions of flat, 2in, translucent larval eels are carried by currents back across the Atlantic, reaching European estuaries from March to May. By now they are about an inch longer and the shape of a pencil. Because of their translucence they are known as glass eels or elvers. These overcome all manner of natural hazards on the migration inland to freshwater. Once their destinations are reached, pigmentation changes to a golden-brown and the cycle begins again.

The shallow waters of Lough Neagh have provided a rich harvest to the population round its shores for thousands of years. There are perch, bream and pike, pollan (a freshwater herring) and dollaghan, a unique species of brown trout. At one time, a big run of salmon passed through the lough and there was always an abundance of and demand for fresh eels. Fishing for brown eels in the summer months with long-lines and draft nets has been the way of life for many local families since time

immemorial – a hard but idyllic existence with a troubled history of gradually escalating conflict between the brown eel fishermen on the lough and those who operated the silver eel weirs on the Bann during the winter.

In 1605, ownership of the bed, soil and fishing rights on Lough Neagh and the Bann were granted by James I to Sir Arthur Chichester, Lord Deputy of Ireland. This was suspended under Cromwell's Commonwealth but reconfirmed to Chichester's descendant, the Earl ►

Hauling nets, taking the catch at a weir, baiting the long-lines – it's all hard work

of Donegal, after the restoration of Charles II. The rights were the ancestral property of that family until they passed by marriage to the Earls of Shaftesbury in 1857, and have remained with them to the present day.

Leases to fish commercially for the different species were rented by interested parties and for many years, as long as supply exceeded demand, there was little cause for conflict among those with vested interests in the eels. This was to change with the improved transport that arrived during the industrial revolution and the phenomenal popularity of jellied eels. Eels packed in ice could be sent by rail and steamer to Liverpool or Stranraer and be in Billingsgate within 24 hours.

There was still a domestic market for smaller eels caught on the lough during the summer but the plump, mature silver eels were the most sought-after for jellying. The company holding the eel fishing rights could make a fortune during the winter migration from the weirs on the Bann at Toomebridge, Portna and Movanager. Inevitably, the brown eels caught by the fishermen were perceived as a threat to the catch at the weirs. For decades, successive leaseholders sought to restrict the activities of the fishing families – either by litigation or violence – while the lough fishermen insisted that they had a moral right to their traditional way of life. Even a case that went to the House of Lords just before the First World War failed to prove conclusively that the leaseholder held exclusive rights to the eels on both the Bann and the lough. The acrimony rumbled on, with the fishermen doggedly launching their boats.



Sometimes they fished with the leaseholder's permission and sold their catch to the company. At other times they were forced to poach and find their own markets.

The situation for the eel fishermen worsened dramatically in the late Fifties when a Dutch firm combined with the four principal Billingsgate eel wholesalers to acquire the lease to the fishing rights. In 1963 the latter won a judgment in the Northern Ireland High Court which gave them an absolute monopoly over the eel fishing on the lough and the Bann. Fishermen could operate only if granted permission by the new company, under its conditions, and had to sell the catch to the company at a price determined by the directors. This regime could have put the several hundred families whose livelihoods depended on fishing brown eels out of business.

At this low point, Father Oliver Kennedy stepped into the ring. As curate of the scattered rural parish of Duneane, where many of the



Scenes of clerical life: Father Kennedy is managing director of the fishery

determined that this situation would not occur in Lough Neagh. Fishing under licence for brown eels is strictly regulated and three fishery patrol boats operate 24-hour surveillance to ensure the rules are adhered to. Effectively the season is from 1 May until mid October and only the traditional methods of draft netting or long-lining are permitted. Both involve long hours and periods of unremitting labour.

Eels become active and look for food – carrion or virtually anything smaller and slower than themselves – at night. Long-liners, working in pairs from deep-keeled, 26ft, open boats, start setting lines in the early afternoon: three lines per boat, each with 500 hooks laboriously baited with mealworm, earthworm or pollen fry. These are left attached to buoys until 4am when the fishermen are permitted to “take the catch”. The live eels are transferred to cages at landing quays round the lough shore for collection later that day. The long-liners then start painstakingly unravelling and preparing their lines for the afternoon run by coiling them on to a flat board.

The constant launching and hauling of the two-man, 90yd draft nets requires less initial preparation but is more physically demanding. Although draft netting is permitted by day or night, both long-liners and netters are limited to a variable daily catch quota averaging 50kg per boat. ▶

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families lived, he had been deeply concerned at the hardship these restrictions were imposing on his parishioners. On his advice, the fishermen organised themselves. Then, in 1965 when an opportunity arose to purchase a fifth share in the existing company, a co-operative society was formed. In a corporate struggle, during which the fishermen established lucrative new markets of their own on the Continent, the society bought the remaining shares. By 1971, with Father Kennedy as its managing director, the Lough Neagh Fishermen Co-operative Society had acquired the eel fishing rights on Lough Neagh and the Lower Bann, achieving in the space of 10 years the hopes of previous generations.

From the outset, the objective of the Society has been to safeguard the interests of the local community and conserve the eel stocks for the future. The demand for smoked eel on the Continent had caused European resources to become overfished and Father Kennedy was



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Eels are shipped as freight on passenger flights from Belfast. Caught on the lough in the morning they arrive in Holland that afternoon and are on sale, smoked, the following morning



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The silver eel catch of 150 tonnes at the weirs pays the overheads of running the fishery, a non-profit making, self-help society. The fishermen are paid each week, while the balance of profits from the sale of brown eels takes the form of a further payment at Easter and Christmas.

Each boat's catch is collected from the shore in numbered containers and delivered to headquarters. A dozen men work on either side of a series of wooden troughs down the centre of sorting hall. Individual containers are tipped into the first trough and eels of no commercial value are removed to a drain that leads back to the Bann. The rest are weighed and the weight credited to the relevant boat. The heaving, squirming mass is then channelled along the next trough and any exceptionally large eels extracted with tongs and put aside for specialist customers. The remaining eels are bagged, packed in ice and boxed for shipment as freight on passenger flights from Belfast. Eels caught on the lough in the morning arrive in Holland that afternoon and are on sale, smoked, the following morning. Around 500 tonnes of brown eels are processed a year; most go to Holland for smoking, the remainder to Germany and Billingsgate.



However, the fishery's future is again under threat. In the early Eighties, the migration of returning elvers, known as the recruitment, collapsed. Among the hypotheses advanced are: a change in the course of the Gulf Stream carrying elvers away from European estuaries; salination reduced by global warming, affecting elvers' buoyancy; and pollution creating incipient infertility in silver eels.

Whatever the reason, Father Kennedy was quick to act. There has always been a massive congregation of elvers in the River Severn and there the drop in numbers made a smaller impact. In 1984, 1,335kg of elvers (four million) were purchased from fisherman on the Severn at £29/kg to replenish Lough Neagh. Over the past 21 years the Co-operative has bought two and a half million kilograms of elvers to maintain the fishery's viable status. However, the

continued shortage and demand for wild elvers from Continental and Far Eastern eel farms has driven the price up to over £400/kg. This cost has been carried by the Co-operative alone and repeated applications for some form of government support have been ignored.

Over the same period, the Co-operative voluntarily introduced further conservation practices designed to preserve existing stocks and maximise the escape of silver eels. A voluntary ban on fishing for brown eels on weekends was introduced. The eel weir at Movanager was closed down and the lease of another, operated by a different company below the tidal stretch of the Bann, was acquired and fishing there discontinued. When the remaining weirs are fished, a section of the river, known as the Queen's Gap, remains un-netted at all times, allowing eels to pass through unhindered. There is also a natural reduction in fishing. When the Co-operative started there were many more eel boats on the lough. Now there is no shortage of employment in the area and lifestyle expectations have risen. Incomes from fishing can't compete with local wages and the number of boats has dwindled.

In the past couple of years the European Union has woken up to the catastrophe facing commercial eel fisheries in Europe through over-fishing and the shortage of elvers. Measures under consideration include a severe reduction in the silver eel catch (likely) and the an outright ban on fishing (possible), in all member countries.

Father Kennedy is concerned. He alone anticipated the crisis when the elver recruitment first collapsed and has spent 20 years and a great deal of money maintaining the stock in Lough Neagh. His conservation policies have already resulted in the silver eel escapement increasing to over 40 per cent. Further restrictions imposed by the EU would threaten the viability of the Co-operative and the livelihoods of 300 or so dependent families.

The Lough Neagh Fisherman's Co-operative is an extraordinary example of what can be achieved by a disadvantaged community. Father Kennedy has devoted a lifetime to protecting the interests of its members by creating the most productive and sustainable wild-eel fishery in Europe. He is not someone who gives up easily, and I suspect that, somehow, he will find a way of making Lough Neagh exempt from any restrictions dreamt up by bureaucrats in Brussels. ■

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