

# Times Record Editorial: Eels vs. dams

[letters@TimesRecord.Com](mailto:letters@TimesRecord.Com)

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The American eel lacks the qualities that would endear it to the general public.

Its twisting, coiling and thrashing behavior when accidentally hooked is enough to haunt most amateur anglers for a lifetime. As a species to rally behind, the eel is hopelessly disadvantaged on the sympathy scale when compared to the American bald eagle, the Atlantic salmon, piping plovers and other endangered or threatened species in Maine.

Earlier this year, following a two-year review, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service concluded the American eel doesn't need protection as an endangered species — notwithstanding the finding that eel populations are declining in the Lake Ontario and St. Lawrence River areas, where large dams are blocking the eels' path to spawn in the Sargasso Sea, an expanse of warm, algae-filled water east of Bermuda.

And overfishing of the eels, which are often used as bait, has also led to a decline in the Chesapeake Bay.

Ed Friedman of the Friends of Merrymeeting Bay isn't willing to gamble the American eel's long-term survival on the conclusion reached by USFW that "a decreasing number of eels right now does not necessarily forecast an irreversible trend."

He points out the American eel is a unique species: Each and every eel begins its life in the Sargasso Sea, takes years to reach freshwater streams where they mature, and then returns to their birth waters to spawn and die. So a decline in populations elsewhere, over time, diminishes the overall breeding population that is necessary to replenish fully eel populations in Maine rivers and rivers along the Eastern seaboard.

Why should we care? Well, the simplest answer is that eels in their early life stages are a food source for other fish species. They're an integral part of the food chain: an important food item of larger marine and freshwater fish and a predator on species such as crabs and clams. Take away one link in the chain, and then another and another, and pretty soon you have crashing populations of haddock, cod or salmon.

Friends of Merrymeeting Bay has been tireless in its advocacy for the American eel and other native "diadromous" fish species — such as alewives, shad and salmon — that migrate between freshwater and the sea. Hydropower dams, with their turbines, are seen as decimating adult eel populations. It urges passage of LD 1528, "An Act to Protect Native Diadromous Fish During their Migration," which would require all dams in the state to provide safe passage for migratory fish species, or dam owners could be fined \$1,000 a day.

Andrew Fisk, head of the Bureau of Land and Water Quality for the Maine Department of Environmental Protection, has described the bill as "too absolute" its requirements "draconian" and "not feasible."

Friedman and other advocates say providing safe passage is both feasible and not necessarily cost-prohibitive.

And so we have yet another "pickerel versus payroll" debate. In this instance, the conflict is complicated by the

fact that hydroelectric dams play an important role in providing "green" renewable energy. As a society we cannot afford to dismiss dam owners' concerns about cost as irrelevant, no matter how important eels might be to fresh- and salt-water ecosystems.

Is there a way out of this dilemma? Perhaps.

Why not remove the penalty provision, and create a task force of stakeholders to craft a solution (within a specified deadline) that will both protect American eels and other migratory fish species and allow the dam owners to continue generating safe clean energy with a reasonable return on their investment?

An "either-or" dichotomy, pitting human needs against eels' needs, tends to obscure the interconnections that do exist, however obscurely. Surely, if Friends of Merrymeeting Bay are correct in their analysis that safe and effective eel ramps can be installed at reasonable cost at all but the largest hydroelectric dams, we might start with some demonstration projects at the smaller dams.

Then, if those projects prove successful, we can confidently move forward to finding a way to accomplish the same at the larger dams.