

PATAWOMECK PERSPECTIVES: THE AMERICAN EEL



This fact sheet provides information about the American Eel and its significance to the Patawomeck Indian Tribe of Virginia.

ECOLOGY/LIFE HISTORY OF THE AMERICAN EEL (*ANGUILLA ROSTRATA*)



- The American eel is North America's only catadromous fish, meaning they spend the majority of their life in freshwater, then migrate to the sea to spawn.
- The eel's life starts and ends in the Sargasso Sea. Mature silver eels will migrate from rivers to the Sargasso Sea in the winter and early spring, where they will spawn and die.
- After hatching, eels go through several life stages: leptocephali, glass eel, elver, yellow eel, and finally, silver eel.
- The habitat of the yellow eel is extensive and includes freshwater rivers, streams, lakes, ponds, and estuaries. The eel spends the majority of its life in these habitats as a yellow eel.
- Eel populations have been in decline since the 1980s, likely caused by some combination of shifting ocean currents, pollution, overfishing, parasites, habitat loss due to dams, or increased predation by invasive species such as the blue catfish.



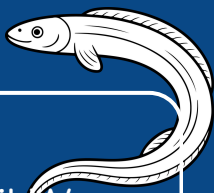
THE PATAWOMECK FISHERY



- Patawomeck fishermen have been commercially harvesting yellow eels for generations. The fishery has experienced many changes over the years.
- Until the late 1940s, much of the eel harvest was salted and used to bait trotlines for crabs. However, the adoption of the crab pot by Patawomeck fishermen in the late 1940s greatly reduced the need for salted eels.
- In the 1960s, George Robberecht opened what was commonly referred to as the Eel Factory on Nomini Creek. The Eel Factory bought approximately two million pounds of live eels per year for sale in European and Asian markets. The rise of eel aquaculture practices in Europe and Asia in the late 1980s greatly reduced demand in these markets and largely resulted in the end of commercial eeling on the Potomac River.



THE SPLIT OAK EEL POT



- Likely adopted by Patawomeck fishermen sometime after the Civil War, the split oak eel pot was the primary method of catching eels until the 1950s.
- A woven basket style trap, the split oak pot consisted of a body and funnel, woven separately on separate molds, which would then be joined together.
- Split oak pots were fished on a line of about 20 pots, typically baited with a half of a crab, bunker, clams, or mud shad. Eeling typically occurred in the spring and fall of the year.
- Despite the split oak pots no longer being used commercially, the tradition of making them is still alive in our tribe today and has become symbolic among our community for a number of reasons. The split oak pot was and is a way that we have resisted the modern world and the ever present echoes of colonialism. They serve as reminders of who we are and where we come from, which keep us connected with each other and with the water and land that we continue to call home today.

