

Conservation news

Eels: uncertain impacts of proposed CITES listings




The European eel *Anguilla anguilla* is listed in CITES Appendix II, regulating its international trade. In October 2024, in preparation for the 20th meeting of the Conference of the Parties in Uzbekistan in 2025, the Directorate-General for the Environment of the European Commission sent letters to all CITES Parties within the range of the European eel and all other anguillids *Anguilla* spp., to inquire whether moving the species to Appendix I would help ensure its survival, and whether a genus-level listing in Appendix II would help ensure that international trade is both legal and sustainable.

Listing the European eel in Appendix I, which prohibits international commercial trade, would effectively terminate all commercial exploitation of the species, given that both eel fisheries and aquaculture rely on the international trade in glass eels (few countries harbour both a glass eel fishery and eel aquaculture). However, contribution to the species' survival could be minimal, as non-fishing threats remain. Eel aquaculture in Europe could transition to other species, such as the American eel *Anguilla rostrata*, which requires comparable aquaculture conditions. However, this species is already facing significant pressure from legal and illegal fishing. The relocation of European eel aquaculture to countries where there are fisheries is another potential consequence, although the associated costs would be high. Evaluation and improvement of EU-wide measures under the *European Council Regulation (EC) No 1100/2007 Establishing Measures for the Recovery of the Stock of European Eel* could be more promising than implementing a new listing on Appendix I with unforeseen consequences.

A genus-level listing of *Anguilla* in Appendix II would aim to enhance the transparency of the global eel trade

through mandatory reporting to the CITES database. Listing the genus rather than individual species is required as species identification is problematic both at the glass eel stage and as consumer products (e.g. grilled eel fillets). For trade to then continue, strict monitoring and control in compliance with CITES requirements would be needed. Following its listing on Appendix II, control measures were significantly improved for the European eel, helped by introduction of the *EU Action Plan Against Wildlife Trafficking* and Europol's lead on this from 2016 onwards. To maximize the positive impact of a genus-level listing, similar actions would be needed for the other 18 *Anguilla* species, many of which occur in countries with poor governance that lack control capacity. Listing of the European eel in Appendix II led to an increase in trafficking of the American eel (for example in the Caribbean, the USA and Canada), and further expansion and intensification of the illegal glass eel trade could be expected.

Before any changes to the CITES listings, a comprehensive assessment is needed to evaluate the expected impacts on stocks, eel aquaculture, legal trade and smuggling relative to conservation targets and risk analyses.

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