An Eel Fishing Legacy Worth Remembering

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Drive east from Québec City on the road that rings the Gaspe Peninsula and you will find a folk art homage to the American Eel *Anguilla rostrata*. *Site d’interprétation de l’anguille de Kamouraska* (Interpretive Site for the Eel in Kamouraska) is one woman’s monument to a fish that has long both supported and enthralled her.

Gertrude Madore and her husband Philippe are the only two eel fishers remaining in Kamouraska, the base for a renowned fishery that once sustained 60 participants. Most of the fishing permits were bought out by the government in 2009 to help prevent total collapse of the fishery. I ask Madore, What happened to the eels? She answers, shaking her head “Hydro dams—just terrible,” a sentiment in accordance with research findings.

Before about 1980, large silver eels migrated in autumn in vast numbers from the Great Lakes and Lake Champlain down the St. Lawrence River to ocean waters. And large they were. In one glass case sits a mount of by far the biggest eel I’ve ever seen—a 12-pounder.

She says that her best one-day catch in her half-century of fishing was 1,200 eels. But landings like this are long over. Numbers of out-migrating eels went into freefall, dropping by 93%–98% since 1980 (COSEWIC 2012). The giant Moses-Saunders Dam on the main-stem St. Lawrence, one of many dozens of hydroelectric dams in the watershed, has an eel ladder but upstream movement through it is only about 3% of the rate seen in the early 1980s. Silver eel mortalities at hydroelectric dams often range between 10% and 60%, but some approach 100% (Busch and Braun 2014). These dams are responsible for 75% of all anthropogenic mortality in Canadian waters and reduce escapement by 40% (COSEWIC 2012). Still, there is a trickle of eels each fall, enough to keep the Madores hoping for a decent run.

A warehouse holds their gear until eel season, nets piled neatly. But in the middle of the floor is the main apparatus on display, standing erect as if set in the water. Short panels of 15-foot-tall netting lead to the heart of the net but out in the estuary, the two leads would face upriver about 500 ft, each steering the eels through a gap in the mesh and then into what looks like a giant wooden lobster trap that retains the catch. The gear is set not far from shore, on sand flats at depths that drain completely on the outgoing tide.

In the old days, at low water the traps were visited by horse; today motorized
carts are used. But it is still a low-tech operation, with the eels being gathered manually and then kept alive in troughs in the yard until buyers come to ship them to regions where eels are still esteemed. Formerly, this was Europe. Now it is mainly Chinese communities in North America.

Another building houses most of the interpretive displays, gaily painted and liberally decorated with scenes from the river and more carved eels. There are models of the gear being fished, dioramas of the eel’s great migrations, and walls of photos of the fishery in its heyday. We buy a postcard from two decades earlier of Madore in her waders standing in the mud between the wings of a net and smiling proudly; the back of the card states in French that she is the first woman ever to have received a professional fishing license in Québec.

Today, the museum helps Madore recover some of the income lost to the decimated eel runs. But now that she is in her late 70s, it also offers a tenuous connection between the present and an important, but now nearly lost, fishing legacy.

REFERENCES
