

ENDANGERED SPECIES

Longfin eel

Many New Zealanders can recount a story about giant eels as fat as your leg that they have seen caught. When people talk about eels this size they will almost certainly be talking about the longfin.

DOC considers longfin eels to be a threatened species in gradual decline. This means that the longfin, although relatively common, is slowly disappearing from our lakes and rivers. If this continues they could easily join the ranks of our more endangered species like the takahe and tuatara. The commercial and recreational fishery for the eels is managed by the Ministry of Fisheries, which has introduced quotas and minimum and maximum size limits over the last decade in an effort to protect the species.

Longfin are one of three species of eels found in New Zealand's freshwaters. The other main eel species is the shortfin eel, which generally grows much smaller and doesn't venture as far inland.

A third species, the Australian spotted eel, is very rarely caught and is thought to have self-introduced itself a few decades ago.

MONSTERS

Longfin eels are our largest freshwater fish - growing up to 2 metres in length and 25kg in weight. There are stories about bigger eels but none have been proven.

LAST MINUTE BREEDERS

Like most eel species longfins only breed once at the very end of their lives. This means every eel killed is an eel that never had the chance to breed. Female longfin eels grow the biggest and take a long time to do so, sometimes over 80 years.

BIG TRAVELLERS

Longfin eels travel thousands of kilometres out to sea, over 300km inland and up to 1200 metres above sea level. Mature eels migrate downstream during high flows and out to sea to breeding grounds in the Pacific Ocean near Tonga. See-through baby glass eels start arriving in New Zealand river mouths in spring where they transform into darker elvers before migrating inland. The elvers love to climb and can make their way past steep waterfalls.

TOP OF THE FOOD CHAIN

Big eels are the top predators in rivers, lakes and wetlands. Small eels tend to eat mostly aquatic bugs but as they get bigger they move on to fish, including other eels. Very big eels will also eat ducklings and other unwary birds. Eels are not fussy and will readily feast on a free meal provided by dead animals that have fallen into the water.

THREATS

Longfin are vulnerable to overfishing because they are so long lived and only breed once. They have lost a lot of habitat through wetland drainage and the construction of hydro-dams and other barriers which they cannot climb. The quality of river habitat has also declined through land clearance and agricultural development.

YOU CAN DO YOUR BIT

Eeling is a popular pastime but if we want to continue to enjoy it DOC recommends people return any eels they don't want to eat unharmed and consider returning all big eels over 75 cm. Making sure they don't swallow hooks helps ensure their survival after being released. That big eel may have been around a lot longer than you.