



# THE EEL-LEGAL TRADE IN EUROPEAN EEL

*Unearthing the Illegal Business behind the 'European Ivory'*

Aitor Ibáñez Alonso | Utrecht University

CONTACT:

aitoralonso\_91@hotmail.com

LinkedIn | ResearchGate

## The 'Eel-phant' in the room

### European Eels on the brink of extinction:

- One of the most trafficked species in the world (over 90 million specimens annually) fueling a multibillion dollar industry of processed eel meat in Asia that reaches worldwide consumers.
- Prices of one kilo of glass eels in the black market between 1,000 - 6,000 EUR.

The study of the IWT has been focused on iconic megafauna and species that consider the facet of the Western world as a consumer or transit hub. However, **the illegal trade in European eels is a landmark opportunity to deem the role of Europe as a source country for wildlife trafficking.**

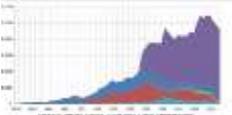
## Methods

Mixed methods research design with data and methodological triangulation (QUANT->QUAL) to increase validity and reliability.

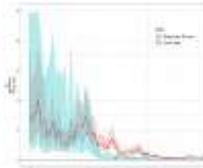
1. Quantitative descriptive analyses of two data sets:
  - CITES Trade Database (N= 432).
  - Confiscations (N= 89).
2. Qualitative data obtained through multi-sited fieldwork:
  - 18 semi-structured interviews and several informal conversations with over 30 informants.
  - Participant observation during fieldwork (e.g. towns, rivers, facilities).pp

## The Eel Rush

Development of a colossal aquaculture industry in East Asia (mainly China) resulted from recent shifts in the global economic order.



Global demand of eel meat led by global popularity of Japanese-style products.



Dramatic decrease in European eel recruitment throughout the years mainly due to loss of habitat and increasing overexploitation by fisheries over the years.

**Power asymmetries = different degrees of criminalization of eel fishing and trade** at different levels which have been facilitating an illegal trade in glass eels.

**Criminogenic asymmetries in the realms of politics, law, economy and ecology** that is eventually fueled by the global demand of eel meat.

## The Fishy Numbers

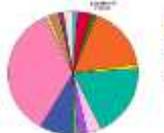


### CITES Trade Database

Huge discrepancies in legal trade data suggests that legal actors might be involved in the illegal trade in glass eels with a significant shift to Northern African and Eastern European countries.

### Confiscations

Glass eels flow illegally from European source countries to Asia either through air cargo (legal companies) or in personal checked-in baggage (smuggling rings). Shifts in MO and trade routes = the organization behind the illegal trade both in glass eels and eel meat is highly sophisticated and resilient.



## The Eel-Legal Trade

### The idealized pipeline model in the illegal trade in eels



By using an idealized pipeline model it can be seen how different legal and illegal actors are constantly interacting across the legal-illegal continuum.

### The legal-illegal interface

#### ➢ HOW?

1. **Symbiotic relationships** (e.g. outsourcing middlemen during handling and smuggling stages), collaboration (extracting and smuggling stages), or laundering.
2. **Antithetical relations** based on injurious or predatory for the control of the legal and illegal markets (extracting, gathering and handling stages).

#### ➢ WHY?

The embeddedness of crime in the underworld is paramount to understand why this illegal trade exists and continues over the years, since many legitimate businesses provides vital elements for its continuity such as finance, equipment or laundering.

## Organizing the Eel-Legal Trade

By looking at different categorizations of groups involved, it can be seen that the main corporate crime groups overlap with:



1. Crime group categories may display traits of the other groups.
2. Corporate crime groups overlap with OC groups (e.g. poachers or smuggling rings) or disorganized networks (e.g. opportunistic poachers, mules or transport companies).
3. Minor overlaps with other OC structures or corporate actors related to other serious crimes (e.g. drugs or wildlife crime).

**Conclusion = The illegal trade in eels has mainly a hybrid corporate-organized crime nature** whereby the different categories of groups are fluid. The illegal trade in eels is better understood as embedded in different social relations between groups through all sorts of interferences (e.g. legal sphere, social ties derived from family, ethnicity, culture or trust).

## A Game of Eels

Exploring the social and political dimensions of power dynamics through a green criminological perspective.

1. **Social construction of environmental crimes, blame and harms.**
  - Largely embedded in political differences at many levels (International, EU or regional/local).
  - Moral entrepreneurs emphasize in anthropocentric harms to further deem the illegal trade as a criminal activity. Green criminological perspective unravels egocentric and biocentric harms resulting from the 'wrongdoing' activities of powerful actors.
2. **De-constructing environmental crime and harms.**
  - Other actors affected by the criminalization of eel fishing and trade (fishermen, eel industry) react in form of resistance (riots, political lobby) in order to negotiate meanings of environmental crime and harms.

## References

Dowles, P., & Francis, P. (2018). *Doing criminological research*. SAGE Publications Limited.

ICES. (2019). *Report of the Joint EIFAD/CE/CFQM Working Group on Eels* (WGEEL) 27 August-2 September, Bergen, Norway.

Passas, N. (1999). Globalization, criminogenic asymmetries and economic crime. *European Journal of Law Reform*, 1, 399-424.

Passas, N. (2002). Cross-border crime and the interface between legal and illegal actors. *Security Journal*, 16(1), 19-37.

Shoesh, H., & Cook, V. (2015). *Estimatee origins: An analysis of Anguilla production*. TRAFFIC, Tokyo, Japan.

Van Uhm, D. (2016). *The illegal wildlife trade: Inside the world of poachers, smugglers and traders* (Studies of organized crime, volume 15). Switzerland: Springer.

Van Uhm, D. & Nijman, R. (2020). The convergence of environmental crime with other serious crimes: Subtypes within the environmental crime continuum. *European Journal of Criminology*.

Van de Bunt, H., Siegel, D., & Zaretski, D. (2014). The social embeddedness of organized crime. In L. Paoli (Ed.), *The Oxford handbook of organized crime*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Wyatt, T., van Uhm, D., & Nijman, A. (2020). Differentiating criminal networks in the illegal wildlife trade: organized, corporate and disorganized crime. *Trends in Organized Crime*, 1-17.