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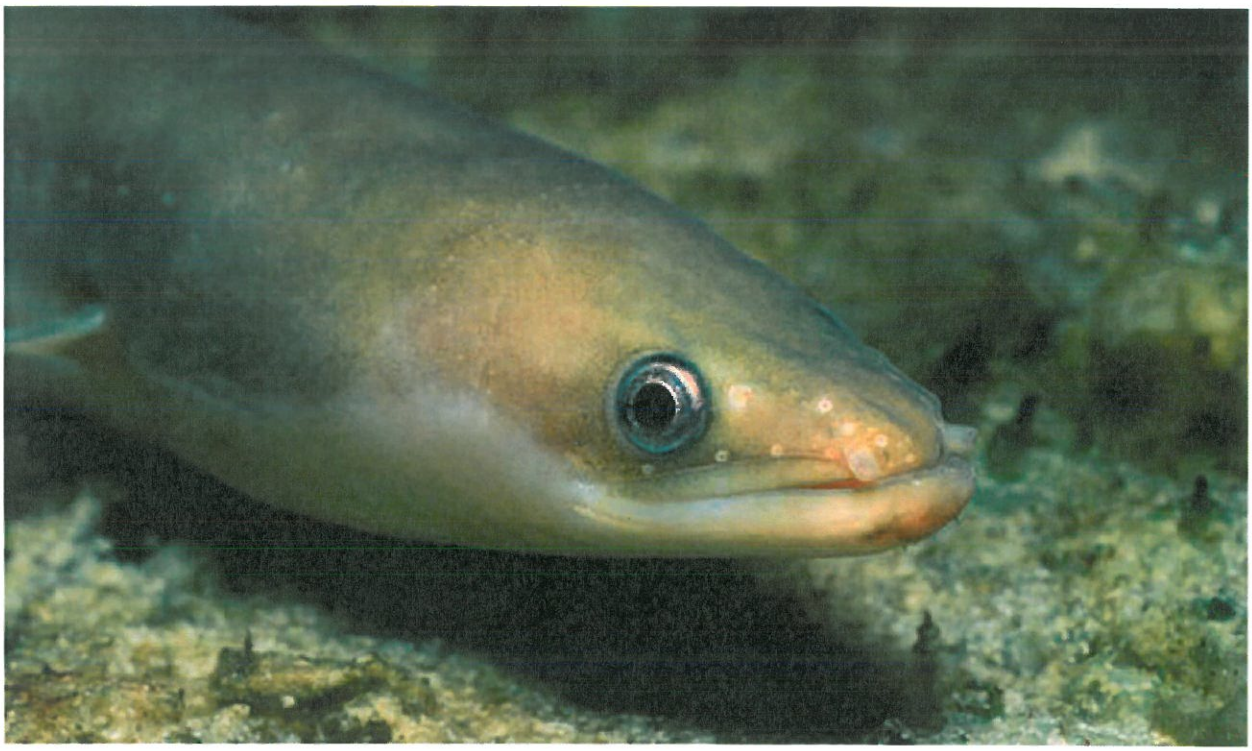
Save our eels: Research could protect delicacy enjoyed by generations of East Enders

WHEN David Beckham was transferred from Manchester United to Real Madrid, he famously said that jellied eels were one of the things he missed most about playing overseas.


Research shows that eels are getting chopped up in the turbines of hydropower stations

Jellied eels have been the delicacy of choice served up at an East End knees ups for years but the main ingredient is in series decline.

The plight of the critically endangered European eel has seen it put on a higher conservation footing than the giant panda and African elephant.

Numbers of young eels swimming in our rivers have crashed by more than 90 per cent in recent decades, with pollution, overfishing and climate change all suggested as reasons for their decline.

New research led by the University of Southampton is paving the way to protect eels when they embark on their migration from our rivers to the Atlantic Ocean.

Eels complete a marathon journey from their nursery grounds in the Sargasso Sea off Florida to European waters where they mature, fatten up and then head back to the ocean to spawn.

Research has revealed large eels leaving Europe are getting chopped up in the turbines of hydropower stations as they head downriver to the sea. Because of their long bodies, eels are at risk of being struck by the rotating blades of hydropower stations, causing high death rates.

Work between fish biologists and engineers, led researchers at the University of Southampton and involving the Environment Agency and the University of Padua in Italy, shows how using "accelerating water gradients" - structures to speed up water flow - can help the eels escape.

In field experiments, Dr Adam Piper, from the University's International Centre for Ecohydraulics Research (ICER), used acoustic telemetry to track the paths of 40 tagged eels as they approached a hydropower intake site where the speed of water flows were manipulated.

his interdisciplinary research provides hope that behavioural deterrents may be developed to divert eels away from hazardous routes during their downstream migration
Dr Paul Kemp, International Centre for Ecohydraulics Research

The results of the research, published in the journal Proceedings of the Royal Society B, revealed eels showed stronger avoidance when the acceleration of water velocity was greater. Under normal water speeds, the eels lined up as they approached the power station passively, leaving themselves at risk of being chopped up..

However, by speeding up the flow by using high water velocity gradients, the eels saved themselves by quickly swimming in the opposite direction upstream.

Dr Paul Kemp from ICER and the project leader, said: "This interdisciplinary research provides hope that behavioural deterrents may be developed to divert eels away from hazardous routes during their downstream migration."