

Letter from 1909 could solve missing fish riddle

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An adult male *S. fluviatilis* specimen from Cyprus deposited in the Museum collection in 1909.

A letter sent to the Museum more than a hundred years ago could unravel the mystery absence of the freshwater river blenny from the island of Cyprus.

The river blenny, *Salaria fluviatilis*, lives in waters with a moderate to high current and is often found in deeper parts of streams at high elevations.

It is currently known to be living on 10 other Mediterranean [islands](#) that

are either relatively large or close to the mainland, as well as elsewhere in Europe and Africa.

Doubts

Although Cyprus is the third largest Mediterranean island and has plenty of streams where the [fish](#) could survive, it is rarely mentioned in the island's natural history literature, which has led to doubts about its existence there.

In conjunction with a team of Greek researchers, Museum Fish Curator James Maclaine re-examined key literature and the results of an extensive fish survey recently carried out on the island, but found no concrete proof that it ever inhabited Cyprus.

Letter from the commissioner

What Maclaine did discover, however, was an archived letter connected to three specimens of the river blenny deposited in the Museum collection in 1909. The story was recently published in the *Journal of Natural History*.

The letter was sent with the specimens by Roland L N Michell on 28 January 1909 and reveals that they came from Limmasol in Cyprus, where Michell was the commissioner for around 30 years.

'[The fish] is found in two or three of the torrents of this District [Limmasol],' he wrote. 'Nearly all of these run dry (or very nearly dry) during the hottest months of summer.'

'I have been trying for four to five years to obtain specimens without success, and have only recently succeeded in getting a few.'

Lead researcher Stamatis Zogaris said that to his knowledge these samples are the only preserved specimens of the fish from Cyprus and the only known evidence that it once inhabited the island.

DDT poisoning

'The rarity or loss of *S. fluviatilis* from Cyprus is testament to the fact that Cyprus has witnessed a widespread degradation of large areas of unique and critical natural inland waters,' Dr Zogaris said.

Between 1945 and 1978, Cyprus underwent an extensive anti-malaria campaign, involving the widespread use of DDT, which could have wiped out the species on the island.

When questioned, local people frequently mentioned a 'remarkable absence of crabs, semi-aquatic grass snakes, amphibians and fish', which they attribute to the prolonged and widespread DDT poisoning.

Potential comeback

Dr Zogaris added that even if the river blenny is extinct on Cyprus, it would be possible to reintroduce it with a human-assisted recolonisation programme, because there is adequate habitat for the fish on the island.

Provided by Natural History Museum

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