

Japan faces record low eel catch, renewing stock fears

April 13 2018, by Miwa Suzuki



Eel is a delicacy enjoyed all over Japan

Japan is on track for a record low catch of baby eels this year, renewing fears about declining stocks of the endangered fish, a favoured summer

delicacy for Japanese.

At the end of March, Japan had 8.8 tons of baby "Anguilla japonica" eels in culture ponds, including imports from China, Taiwan and South Korea, according to a preliminary tally by the fisheries agency.

That is a plunge from more than 18 tons logged at the same time in the last two years.

The tally refers to baby eels caught in Japan, as well as those caught elsewhere in Asia and imported by Japan.

The fish are usually caught in the wild and sold to farmers who raise them until they are big enough for culinary use.

The fishing season that began in December will end in late April, and Japan's volume is on track to fall below the record-low season-end figure of 12.6 tons it hit in 2013.

Eels, known as unagi in Japan, are a prized summer delicacy and demand for the fish is high across Asia.

In addition to overfishing, experts say river dams, pollution and the draining of wetlands, as well as oceanic changes and parasites may be playing a role in declining stocks.

'Further depletion'

Japan's fisheries agency strongly rejected the suggestion that overfishing was endangering stocks.



The eel catch is at record low

"Annual catches are largely swayed by how ocean currents move... 'The haul halved' does not mean the [stock](#) resource halved," agency official Tatsuya Nakaoku told AFP.

Environmentalists have regularly sounded the alarm on the status of *Anguilla japonica* eels, with the fish on the International Union for Conservation of Nature's "endangered" list.

"We fear further depletion in the stock," said Hiromi Shiraishi at Traffic, a non-governmental group focused on the trade of wild animals.

"In addition, a bigger problem is that we think the current resource control method cannot respond sufficiently to the decreasing stock," she told AFP.

She noted that the cap on eels in Japanese farming ponds is fixed at 21.7 tons, unlike that for tuna, whose quota decreases with signs of stock depletion.

Eels spawn near the Mariana Islands in the Pacific and the babies travel thousands of kilometres towards East Asia in [ocean currents](#).

Their spawning process remains a mystery, and efforts to breed them in captivity for commercial purposes have been unsuccessful.

Baby eels are cultivated in ponds. The peak unagi season for Japan is summertime.

Many Japanese believe the eels, served barbecued and basted in a thick sauce of sake, soy sauce and sugar, provide much-needed stamina during the energy-sapping heat and humidity of the summer.

Prices for the dish have been on the rise in recent years, and this season's low catch will only push costs up further, said Takashi Moriyama, chief of the Japan Eel Importers Association.

Even with imports of adult or cooked eels to boost supply, "prices will rise inevitably," he told AFP.

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