

SUSQUEHANNA RIVER

AGAINST THE CURRENT



Joanna Berry, an environmental intern with the Susquehanna River Basin Commission, works with other conservationists to look for eels in the Conewago Creek outside Elizabethtown. Photos by Joe Hermiti, PennLive

Eels were once a common part of life on the river, but they nearly disappeared. Now they're back.

Nick Malawskey For PennLive

There was a time when the American eel was a common sight on the Susquehanna River, when eel was proudly served to travelers along the river's banks and when a family could make money packing and salting the snakelike fish into barrels for shipment to Baltimore and New York.

In the pools of the river, the eels, which can grow up to 4 feet in length, were a common sight. Enough so that, like bass, musky and shad, they were often the subject of fishing stories told along the river.

Born in the Atlantic Ocean far out in the Sargasso Sea, baby eels (called elvers) float with the tides and currents toward the eastern seaboard. From there they migrate inland, using rivers and their tributaries as natural highways into the interior. Here, in fresh water, they live for up to 20 years, growing into mature fish before once again returning to the ocean to spawn the next generation of travelers.

For as long as man lived along the river, he lived with, and took advantage of, the neighboring eels. Swatara, the name of the creek and local municipalities alike, is said to be derived from a Native American term meaning "where we fed on eels."

At the turn of the 20th century, eels remained an important part of life for those along the river. State estimates at the time put the eel catch along the Susquehanna River at more than 150,000 pounds annually, with a value of more than \$100,000.

But life along the Susquehanna was changing. The pastoral nature of the valley was shifting, as factories rose along the banks. Electricity came to Harrisburg along with sanitation, hospital services, the automobile and paved roads.

Harrisburg, which in 1900 had a population of 50,000, by 1920 had reached 75,000. In York and Lancaster, similar population booms occurred. As the river cities and industries grew, hydroelectric dams were constructed across the

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These two American eels were collected from the Conewago Creek.

Facts about eels

125,000

The number of eels that were transported into the Susquehanna River basin and stocked at Harrisburg's City Island, along the West Shore and at Fort Hunter in Susquehanna Township in 2017.

800,000

Eels were captured, transported and released by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service into the Susquehanna or its tributaries between 2007 and 2016.

20 years

The amount of time it takes for eels to grow and mature in fresh water before returning to the ocean to spawn the next generation.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service