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THE VIEW FROM ATLANTIC AVENUE

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March Marks the Start of the Elver Fishery

March is known for the start of Spring, but there's another important season that begins in March for Maine's coastal communities... the elver fishery! Highly lucrative, the American eel fishery, specifically its juvenile form known as elvers, brings a flurry of activity among Maine fishermen vying for their share of this valuable catch. American eels are catadromous - they spawn in the ocean but live much of their lives in freshwater rivers, streams, lakes, and ponds. After hatching in the Sargasso Sea, elvers migrate thousands of miles to reach inland waters. After they've lived their lives (which can be anywhere from 5 to up to 40 years!), they return to the ocean to reproduce.

Elver fishing has a longstanding tradition and, at times, a complex and contentious history. American eel has been harvested from Maine's rivers, streams, lakes, and ponds for thousands of years; a valuable source of sustenance for Maine's native people. Recently, the fishery has become more exclusive. Entry into the fishery was capped at 425 licenses in 2017, and since then the Department of Marine Resources has only allowed new entry through license lotteries. This spring, 16 Mainers were granted the opportunity to apply for an elver license after participating in a license lottery, which saw over 4,500 entries. That's only a 0.3% chance of getting drawn, and yet 2 local fishermen received licenses! The sixteen available licenses stemmed from those that were not renewed during the years 2022 and 2023.

With prices as they are, it's no wonder an elver license is a hot commodity. Last year (2023), Maine's elver fishery was the second most valuable, earning fishermen nearly \$20 million at just over \$2,000 per pound. Fishermen use a dip net or a fyke net for harvesting.

What makes elvers so sought after? They're prized in international markets, particularly in East Asia, and are considered a delicacy. The vast majority of elvers sold to Asia are grown through aquaculture ventures to raise these elvers into full grown eels eventually sold as unagi. Notably though, a small sliver of harvested elvers don't have to travel far - American Unagi, founded and owned by Sara Rademaker and based right here in Maine, grows and raises eel and is the only land-based eel aquaculture company in the United States.

Why are Asian aquaculturists buying juvenile American eel to grow? Well, it's the best option they have. In a simplified sense, there is still so much unknown about their life cycle that efforts to breed American eel in captivity have remained unsuccessful - thus they rely on wild caught elvers from places like Maine.

If you're lucky enough to participate in this fishery, know someone who's licensed and can join, or even when you see fyke nets set up in your nearby streams, I hope you'll remember the wildly fascinating, important, and mysterious life cycle of American eel. Do you have a question about our fisheries? Send it to info@coastalfisheries.org or call 207.367.2708. Learn more about MCCF by visiting us at www.coastalfisheries.org.