



GOVERNMENT OF BERMUDA

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Sargasso Sea Features in Science Journal

The March 28th 2014 issue of the journal "Science" featured an article entitled "*Champions of the Sargasso Sea*" which highlighted work being carried out by a group of Danish researchers who travelled to the Sargasso Sea last month to study the declining European Eel population that spawn there.

The article said: "*It may lie beyond the jurisdiction of any nation, but the Sargasso Sea – and the hundreds of marine species it supports – has many advocates. Last week, a team of 33 researchers with the Danish Eel Expedition 2014 arrived in this open-ocean region of the North Atlantic to study the declining European Eel population that spawn there. Using fine-mesh nets to catch larvae, they hope to "plug the main gaps in our knowledge" of the eel's early diet and breeding habits, says the project's leader Peter Munk of the National Institute of Aquatic Resources at the Technical University of Denmark in Charlottenlund. The team will also examine whether climate-related changes to ocean currents are contributing to the eel's decline.*"

Principal Scientist for Marine Heritage and Ocean Human Health at the Department of Conservation Services Dr. Philippe Max Rouja said: "The eel larvae the scientists are searching for in these current research projects are produced when the mature European and American eels gather to spawn in the Sargasso Sea – in which Bermuda is located.

"These eels travel from rivers all over the US, Canada and Europe, thousands of miles, to spawn somewhere in the Sargasso Sea. There is strong evidence that the spawning aggregation is in the 'high seas' part of the Sargasso Sea to the South West of Bermuda. The spawning aggregation in the Sargasso Sea has never been located. Its location and the reason for the incredible ocean migration of thousands of miles remains one of marine biology's great mysteries.

"These current massive scientific efforts (with ships from Germany and Denmark on month long expeditions) to understand the full life-cycle of the eel are driven in part by the dramatic decline in the eel populations in both Europe and North America resulting in the almost total closure of these economically valuable and culturally important fisheries. The need to understand the full life-cycle of the species has become paramount to working towards a recovery plan."

The article also made mention of the recently-signed "*Hamilton Declaration on Collaboration for the Conservation of the Sargasso Sea*," which was signed in Bermuda on March 11th 2014 by several countries, including Bermuda. The Declaration is a non-binding political statement that indicates signatories' interest in voluntarily collaborating on efforts to conserve the Sargasso Sea - a vast patch of ocean named for a type of free-floating seaweed called *Sargassum*.

The article said: "*Meanwhile five countries, including the United States and the United Kingdom, signed a nonbinding agreement earlier this month to protect the area from over-fishing and pollution. The organization behind the agreement, a partnership between scientists, conservation groups, and the Government of Bermuda called the Sargasso Sea Alliance released a film celebrating the agreement available at <https://vimeo.com/89868953>.*"

"The eel is an especially interesting case as through its massive trans-Atlantic migrations it highlights the interconnectedness of high seas areas and areas within many national jurisdictions," said Department of Conservation Services Wildlife Ecologist Dr Mark Outerbridge. "The need to protect the eel at all stages of its life, regardless of where it is found, is now critically important. Bermuda, as founding member of the Sargasso Sea Alliance, can be very proud to be playing a role in figuring out how to add protection measures to these important species. The eel is a protected species under Bermuda's Protected Species Act (2003) and if anyone sees these eels in or around ponds and creeks, dead or alive, please contact the the Department Conservation Services at conservation@gov.bm

“The Department would be especially interested if anyone has any information regarding the movements (present or historical) of the juvenile elvers (small eels) returning to Bermuda - specifically in the areas of Mills Creek, Mullet Bay or Ferry Reach.”

For more information on the eels visit: <http://www.conservation.bm/american-european-eels>