

“Where We Feed On Eels”

The American eel is the only fish that spends its adult life in the Susquehanna River and returns to the sea to spawn and die. American eels spawn in a region of the Atlantic Ocean near Bermuda known as the Sargasso Sea. Young eels eventually work their way back to freshwater bodies like the Susquehanna River.

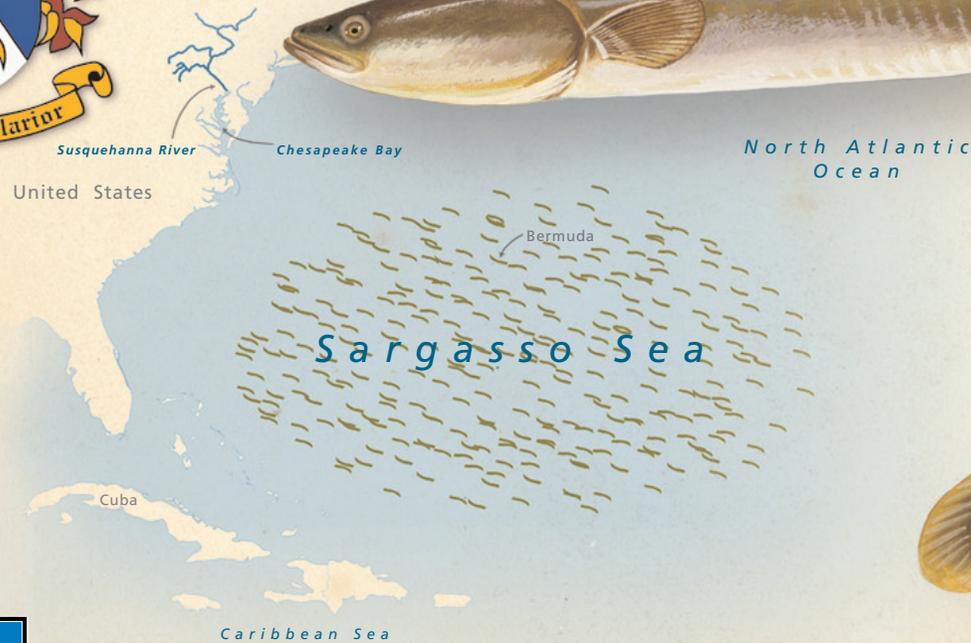
The American eel was an important food for Native Americans. They called this area “Swatara” meaning, “where we feed on eels.” Native Americans fished for eels in the fall using V-shaped stone walls or “weirs” that were built in the river to trap eels migrating downstream.

The crest of Swatara Township contains the symbol of an American eel on its shield—an indication that eel fishing was an important industry to the region.

Courtesy Swatara Township

The highlighted area of the Atlantic Ocean is known as the “Sargasso Sea.” After spending their entire lives in fresh water bodies such as the Susquehanna River, the American eel returns to the Sargasso Sea to spawn and die.

Courtesy Lancaster County Planning Commission



Original art by Duane Raver, courtesy U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service.

European settlers commercially fished for eels until the early 1900s. An estimated one million pounds of eel were taken each year from the Susquehanna around the turn of the 20th century. The official shield of Swatara Township, located a few miles north, contains the image of an American Eel—a symbol of its eel fishery heritage.

While American eels still exist in the Susquehanna, their numbers have plummeted. In 1904, the first of four hydroelectric dams was constructed on the Susquehanna. The dams blocked the eels’ traditional migration route. Today, however, the utility companies are working cooperatively with migratory fish experts to develop safe and efficient passage for young eels at the dams.



Eel weir, Delaware River. Photo extracted from September 1964 *PA Angler* magazine.

Courtesy Pennsylvania Fish & Boat Commission



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Susquehanna River Water Trail

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