The decline of eel *Anguilla anguilla* (L.) in a river catchment of northern Spain 1986–1997. Further evidence for a critical status of eel in Iberian waters

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Abstract: Large-scale surveys by the early 80ies showed that, except in a few coastal streams of northern Spain, the eel *Anguilla anguilla* (L.) was extinct in >80% of the Iberian rivers. A long-term (1986–1997) monitoring of eel abundance in the River Esva, a small river catchment where the species was abundant by the mid 80ies, showed a dramatic decline of eel numbers down to the verge of extinction. As inferred by a parallel decline in the commercial catches of elvers, no other cause than a reduced recruitment of elvers could be identified as responsible for the decline of the Esva eel. The status of the eel in the Iberian Peninsula is critical.

Introduction

Anthropogenic activities along river courses, such as dam construction, pollution and water regulation have been identified as major factors responsible for the severe reduction of eel, *Anguilla anguilla* (L.), stocks throughout its distributional area. Early in this century, the eel was one of the most abundant and broadly distributed fish species in all the rivers across the Iberian Peninsula, but large-scale surveys by the early 1980s showed that, though still abundant in a few coastal streams whose waters flow into the sea unimpeded by human-constructed obstacles, the eel was extinct in >80% of the river catchments (LOBÓN-CERVIÁ et al. 1986, SOSTOA & LOBÓN-CERVIÁ 1986, GRANADO-LORENCO 1991). Hence, the eel was considered as a “Vulnerable” species in the Spanish Red Data Book (BLANCO & GONZÁLEZ 1992).

On the other hand, the assessment of elver fisheries by local administrations, reinforced by the activities of the EIFAC Eel Working Party (BRAUM &