

# Quebec and Ontario work together to save the American eel

BY KALINA LAFRAMBOISE, THE GAZETTE JULY 16, 2014



Emily Young, a stewardship youth ranger who works for the Ontario ministry of natural resources deposits American eels into the Ottawa River at Voyageurs National Park near Hawkesbury, Ont.

**Photograph by:** John Kenney, The Gazette

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HAWKESBURY, Ont – A joint operation between the Ontario and Quebec provincial governments, Hydro-Québec, the Canadian Wildlife Federation and the Algonquins of Ontario saw 400 juvenile American eels released into the Ottawa River for the first time on Wednesday afternoon in an effort to save the species in Ontario.

The American eels were provided from a Hydro-Québec eel ladder at the dam in Beauharnois and transported to Voyageur Provincial Park in East Hawkesbury in the morning. They were released in the middle of the Ottawa River just above the Carillon dam that spans from Carillon to Pointe-Fortune.

“It’s everybody’s transfer,” said David Browne, the director of conservation of the Canadian Wildlife Federation. “It’s great to see everybody from governments, First Nations and organizations trying to make it happen. There is a lot of goodwill today.”

The two provincial governments negotiated the transfer and release over the last few months. Hydro-Québec provided the truck and transferred the fish while the Canadian Wildlife Federation provided tags and equipment for the launch. The Algonquins of Ontario pushed for the transfer and aided on

the ground in the morning.

Browne explained that dams endanger the population of American eels in Ontario and Quebec.

“The dams do two things: they block the eels from going up the river and they also result in the death of a lot of large adults when they come back down the river,” Browne said. “They end up going through the large turbines at the hydro stations.”

American eels begin their lives in the Atlantic Ocean before swimming upstream to Canada. The fish released in the Ottawa River are juvenile and range anywhere from four to six years of age.

Members from all organizations helped weigh, measure and tag the eels before they were released into the river. The reason for tagging the eels is to see if fish move upstream to Chaudière Falls near the Ottawa-Gatineau area.

# MIGRATING 400 EELS TO ONTARIO



JEANINE LEE/THE GAZETTE

Joffre Cote, a management biologist for the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources at the Kemptville district said the project was put together over the last year in hopes of repopulating the Ottawa River with the fish.

“The American eel is a species at risk in Ontario,” said Cote. “We hope it will be an annual event until we find a more permanent upstream passage for the Ottawa River. The odd eel does get through the Carillon dam. We don’t know how or where, but they are resilient creatures.”

The eels are also predominantly female so when they reach adulthood, they will leave the waters of Canada and head for the middle of the Atlantic Ocean to spawn and die. Browne explained that this happens when the eels are between about 17 and 25 years of age.

The shared effort allowed the 400 eels to be released into a slope in the Ottawa River approximately

two kilometres away from the park that borders both provinces.

For Dan Kohoko, a councillor for the Algonquins of Pikwanagan First Nation and a negotiation representative with the Algonquins of Ontario, the American eel is part of his heritage.

“We are very glad to see this happen,” said Kohoko. “We’ve been asking for this transfer for a long time. The eel is an important part of our history and culture, especially for our parents and grandparents.”

Christine Luckasavitch, the economic development officer for Algonquins of Ontario, was excited at the thought of seeing an eel and part of her cultural identity before her. She helped in projects related to the role of eels in Algonquin culture.

“There was a joint project between the Canadian Wildlife Federation and the Algonquins of Ontario to collect traditional knowledge related to eels and that has traditional, practical and spiritual uses,” said Luckasavitch. “They were the most abundant food source.”

Luckasavitch explained that the silver skin of eels were used as a brace or cast in Algonquin traditions to heal broken arms and sore throats.

The transfer may have been the first of its kind between the two provincial governments, but the real test is seeing if the eels will be able to swim downstream years from now.

“Hydro-Québec has been working on solutions to have eels pass the dam successfully, but it is difficult and complicated,” said Browne.

Adult American eels are typically a metre in size and this prevents them from passing through dams successfully.

Browne is hopeful that the governments and organizations will find a solution and for the time being continue to transport eels annually to the Ottawa River.

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Adult American eels have an average lifespan of 25 years

American eels will only spawn in the Atlantic Ocean

Hydro-Québec has an eel ladder at its station in Beauharnois to protect the fish from water turbines



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