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OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

Give Thanks for ... Eel?

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AS the story goes, Squanto — a Patuxet Indian who had learned English — took pity on the Pilgrims of Plymouth Colony who had managed to survive that first brutal winter, and showed them how to plant corn, putting a dead fish in each hole where a seed was planted. But before that, before the ground had even fully thawed, he taught them a perhaps more valuable skill: how to catch a fatty, nutritious fish that would sustain them in the worst of winters. And this food item, likely on the table of that first Thanksgiving, would have carried special significance to those remaining colonists. Eels — a forgotten staple of our forefathers.

Indeed, eel was the dinner that Pilgrims were given on the very day after they made peace with Massasoit, the sachem, or leader, of the region. The following account is from “Mourt’s Relation,” mostly written by a Plymouth resident, Edward Winslow: “Squanto went at noon to fish for eels. At night he came home with as many as he could well lift in one hand, which our people were glad of. They were fat and sweet. He trod them out with his feet, and so caught them with his hands without any other instrument.”

Eels don’t like cold water, and spend the winter balled up, bodies twisted together in the mud. In the frigid months they were usually caught with fork-like spears, the eels pinned between the tines. The fish proved essential to the endurance of the Pilgrims, and it is fitting that a river near Plymouth Colony was named Eel River.

The peculiar life cycle of the freshwater eel was almost tailor-made for the harvest season, and for stockpiling food for the winter. Eels are born in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, hatched as little larvae shaped like willow leaves. From there, they drift and swim toward the coast, where they enter the mouths of freshwater rivers and streams in the spring. I have observed them in that season when plates of ice still line the banks of tidal streams, “like pieces of slender glass rods shorter than a man’s finger,” as Rachel Carson described them.

The inches-long transparent juvenile fish then make their way upstream to feed and grow. They stay for 10 to 30 years, until one autumn when they feel the urge to return to the Sargasso Sea, the warm clockwise gyre more than 1,000 miles east of Bermuda in the Atlantic Ocean, to spawn and die.

In the 17th century, the autumn runs to the saltwater would have been epic, overlapping the hurricane season when an abundance of rainwater swelled the rivers. They moved in great numbers at night, en masse, sometimes forming braids with their bodies to overcome obstacles, or large balls to roll over gravel bars that separate the mouths of rivers from the sea. On wet nights eels would even travel overland, relentless in their quest to return to their natal womb in the deep ocean.

Traditionally, Native Americans caught eels in autumn by building large river weirs, two large stone walls stretching from the banks to the center of the river, forming a large V with the trap at the vortex on the downstream side. If the conditions were right — a steady rain to raise the river level and no moon — they could catch several tons of eel in one night. The fish was then dried and smoked for the winter, manna of huge and reliable proportions. There is evidence that East Coast Indians were using these stone and wood weirs 5,000 years ago, and probably earlier. But if eels were an essential food for Native Americans and early colonists, then why are they neglected as a food fish in modern America? Why isn't eel, instead of turkey, the symbol of colonial resilience and gratitude?

Eels are not easy to like. Their sliminess, as well as their general tendency to stir human uneasiness, has made them a tough species to champion. Eels are conspicuously absent from news reports about our beleaguered wild fisheries (whose demise has been brought ever closer by the calamitous oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico). We hear instead about the magnificent emblems of our seas: the bluefin tuna, the swordfish, the Atlantic salmon, the cod.

But the eel is also disappearing, thanks largely to a multibillion dollar market driven by Japan's appetite for the fish. Juveniles caught in river mouths are shipped to farms in China, where they are raised to edible size and then flown to sushi restaurants around the world — giving eels one of the least sustainable routes to market of any fish, wild or farmed. What's more, global warming, dams and pollution have taken a heavy toll on eel populations in North America and Europe.

What can we do to restore this creature that once made up 25 percent of the fish biomass of Eastern rivers? For starters, we can rehabilitate the local wetlands that nurture eels at all life stages, because eels historically fed not only humans, but nearly everything in the system, from striped bass to cormorants.

We also need to deal with dams that prevent the free exchange of life from the sea to inland waterways. If dams cannot be removed, then they should be equipped with eel ladders to help juvenile eels travel upstream. And hydrodam operators should consider turning off the turbines, which wound or kill eels, for a few hours on autumn nights during the peak of vast unseen migrations of the adult fish to the sea.

Let's be thankful, then, for the beautiful but forgotten Thanksgiving eel. And let's accept responsibility for preserving the fish that did so much to sustain the newcomers to these shores so many years ago.