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## Slither Room

Eels are contortionists, travelers and, in some cultures, sacred.

BY PAUL GREENBERG

**A** FISHERMAN," according to an old Russian proverb, "can spot another fisherman from far away." This is true. And within the fishing clan there is a set of private yet shared moments that bond fishermen together in an almost spiritual communion. The explosion of spray and color when a big fish charges a topwater lure. The devastating ping of snapped line after that same fish makes a last desperate surge and claims its freedom.

But there is one shared experience that my fellow anglers surely know and yet seldom discuss: the moment when a hard-fighting fish finally comes to net and reveals itself to be not some gorgeous bass or trout but an eel. This can happen in a

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clear Maine lake, a tepid Georgia river, the salty blue-green depths off Montauk Point, or in any other body of fresh or salt water around the globe inhabited by one of the many species of the genus *Anguilla*.

### EELS

An Exploration, From New Zealand to the Sargasso, of the World's Most Amazing and Mysterious Fish.  
By James Prosek.  
Illustrated. 287 pp.  
Harper/HarperCollins Publishers. \$25.99.

And while to the Western eye eels lack the charisma we like to assign to glamorous marine megafauna like, say, striped bass (for which eels are often used as bait), their mysterious life cycle and tendency to turn up on the end of the line just about everywhere make them excellent game

for an angling writer who is prepared to go deeper, so to speak.

And so we have "Eels," by James Prosek. Prosek has made his reputation as a kind of underwater Audubon. His trout watercolors, collected in a book when he was still an undergraduate at Yale, bear those particular, exciting hues that still-living fish possess — a quality that fish-catchers cherish and everyday fish-eaters couldn't care less about. As "Eels" demonstrates, Prosek is every bit as good a writer as a painter. Perhaps this is because both his art and writing draw their inspiration from a similar challenge: to express the ineffable, fading aspect of

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the natural world in the industrialized era, the feeling of bright colors slipping through your fingers. It is this quality that makes "Eels" much more than a fish book. It is an impassioned defense of nature itself, rescued from the tired rhetoric of 1970s-style environmentalism by good, honest shoe-leather reporting. And yet it contains the untainted germ of Age-of-Aquarius eco-consciousness by centering on an essential question: Does a tidy scientific analysis of a creature really tell us all we need to know, or are there numinous qualities to every life-form that require a different kind of meditation?

This question takes Prosek to a series of key eel haunts around the world: a river in the Catskills of New York; the traditional Maori eeling grounds of New Zealand; and an odd little volcanic island in the South Pacific called Pohnpei, where the population is divided, like something out of Dr. Seuss, between those (usually from the nearby island of Kosrae) who eat eels and those who think eels are sacred ancestors and would sooner eat a fellow human.

Despite these disparate locales, the fish's life cycle itself manages to unify Prosek's narrative. Eels follow a cycle called catadromy — the contrarian habit of spawning in saltwater and then migrating to freshwater rivers and lakes to mature — the opposite of salmon, striped bass and most other fresh/salt migratory fish. It's the catadromous lifestyle that gives eels their profound weirdness. As adults, some eels will live for a hundred years in a tiny pond while waiting for a storm to come and wash them back out to sea. In the process they may grow until they have "heads on 'em like a full-grown Labrador dog," as one Maori puts it to Prosek. When a big storm finally comes along and moistens up everything nicely, eels will ooze across open ground to get to the next portage, gather up into giant eel balls and roll downhill, or form themselves into eel braids to climb up and over obstructions. Once at sea they will seek out highly specific portions of the ocean they have not seen since they were tiny, transparent creatures called glass eels. And while the general locations of several

species' spawning grounds have been found (including the Sargasso Sea, for the European and American eel) humans have been much less successful in finding eels actually in the act of spawning. Not that they haven't been eager to scoop up the results. One Taiwanese trader Prosek meets hops around the globe from Maine to Micronesia buying glass eels for as much as \$250 a pound for China-based eel ranches that grow baby eels to full size and sell the finished product to Japan, a practice that has devastated populations of the American and European eel.

Prosek explores what science has learned about eels, but it isn't always much. In response to a half-dozen seemingly obvious questions about the fish's habits, all a prominent eel expert named Jim McCleave can come up with is "Dunno." Prosek gets his sources to fess up to science's limitations. "A lot of scientists ignore personal experience altogether, largely because it can't be measured," one eel expert tells him. "That's not necessarily a mistake if you're doing science. But if you're trying to evaluate life on earth, it probably is."

It is both the failing of science to explain things and Prosek's own style of fisherman-as-pantheistic-nature-worshiper that drives him to the Maori and the Lasialap tribe of Pohnpei. Both groups are cagey about revealing their eel myths, some of which involve young girls being violated by eel tails. When he finally does tease out the stories, he risks bombarding the reader with too many details. But like Bruce Chatwin in "The Songlines," Prosek has an ear for the particular strangeness of native storytelling. Even if it doesn't convince you of the spiritual quality of eels, Prosek does at least open a window for the validity of an alternative, non-Western narrative. He does this while simultaneously raising the point that Westerners eavesdropping on native myths are in fact stealing them, just as they have stolen the very land.

Ultimately, Prosek seems to justify his own narrative thefts by trying to repurpose them for the larger cause of eel-kind. Eels, like so many other species, are vanishing from the world. Thanks to thousands of often useless dams throughout North America and Europe, the spiriting away of eel juveniles for the Asian market, and pollution just about everywhere, eel populations have declined by as much as 99 percent in some areas. And it is not just eels, but river-to-ocean connections more generally, that are disappearing — the very flow of organic wealth between land and sea as embodied by migratory fish. We are in fact witnessing the death of the "circulatory system," as Prosek calls it, of nature itself.

At the conclusion of the verbatim transcription of a Micronesian eel myth, the Lasialap elder telling the tale ends the story thus: "Ahi soai pwoat torohr wei likin imwen. Pass it on — from this house to people outside of your house." This is in effect what Prosek has done. In "Eels," he passes on the truth that the often-dreaded eel, like all migratory fish, is vital and mysterious and worthy of our full effort to bring it back. □