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The Life of the Eel The devotion of many Cape Bretoners to the taste of eel is revealed by the willingness of men to stand out on the ice on a frosty day, jabbing down with a spear into the mud. The work isn't as cold as it might seem. If - a man is dressed properly, once he's chopped his first hole he'll be warm, and he'll stay warm working his way slowly around the hole, thrusting the end of his 15' spear into the mud at a greater angle each trip round, wait? ing for that hard to describe grip and vi? bration that tells him to haul back fast. It takes a certain kind of mud to please an eel. There are men of experience who need no more than one jab to know if there might be eels in that mud. The slightest bit of sand and they chop another hole, because eels are rarely found in gritty mud. It was at one time thought that eels were actually born out of mud, and it was also thought that the eel was a relative to the snake. The eel is not a reptile. It is a true fish, having small gill openings, either very tiny or absent scales, and no ventral fins. They have a single fin which runs over the back, along the tail and down the belly. The eel family is called Anguillidae and includes the slime eel, the snipe eel, the common American eel, the conger eel, the snake eel, the deep water long-nosed eel, and the southern moray eels. The American eel, the species *Anguilla rostrata*, is the only one of the 16 members of this family that is found in our waters. The eel is not born spontaneously out of mud. It is a catadromous fish. This means that it is a fish born at sea, that migrates to fresh water to live out most of its life, and that then returns to the sea to spawn and die. This is the reverse of the life cycle of the salmon, which is called anadromous. Both the American eel and the European eel begin life in that part of the Atlantic Ocean called the Sargasso Sea. There is no other portion of the waters of the earth quite like this sea. The tem? perature of the water is high and it receives no river water or melting ice because it is so far from land. It is thus the saltiest part of the Atlantic Ocean, which is the saltiest of oceans. It is the creation of the great currents of the North Atlan? tic, especially the Gulf Stream, which brings into it millions of tons of floating sargassum weed, and the strange assemblage of animals that live in the weed. Most mid-ocean regions are deserts, but the Sargasso Sea is the single exception. And it is in this rare place all the American and European eels on earth are born, and start out on their separate journeys • the American eel to travel over 1000 miles, the European eel to travel 3000 • in search of fresh water. And after a number of years (precisely how many is not know) it is to the Sargasso Sea they both will re? turn to spawn and die. The actual spawning has not been observed. It is known, however, that the young are hatched from eggs floating in upper or intermediate waters in late winter and early spring. The larvae are called *Leptocephalus* (New Latin for "slender-headed,") They are transparent, ribbon-like, have pointed heads and large teeth • but are not thought to eat during this time. About 1/4 inch at birth, the American and European eel spend their first months together. When about 1 inch long, they set off • and somewhere on the route the paths separate. No European eel has ever been found in North America, and no American eel has ever been found in Europe. They will



continue to grow as they travel;they will each obtain a size of 3 to 4 inches; they will each arrive off their respective shore at the same larval stage and at the correct period for the changes necessary to adapt to fresh-water life • despite the American eels CAPE BRETON'S MAGAZINE/16