

The Eel Trapper

He ended his days as a parking lot attendant for the beach-going crowds of summer tourists, but in his eyes you could still see the color of the alongshore sea, the brown of the November marsh in his skin. He was a man who had lived entirely from the bounty of the estuary—herring in spring, eels in autumn, clams in summer, scallops and oysters in winter. He was the last trap fisherman in the region, the last commercial eeler and, for at least a decade or two, the oldest yet unretired man in his field. In effect, he was the last of a dying breed of self-sufficient Yankee watermen.

At age 92, with his own demise not far ahead of him, he seemed to draw a sort of energy from the fact that his body and the watery environment he knew best were slipping into dissolution and death at about the same time. As a result he became, in his last years, an ardent environmentalist, lecturing (sometimes ad nauseum) the innocent summer people who came to his parking lot. Given the course of events that had affected him in his life, you could see how he came to such a pass.

There was a time in the 1920s and early 1930s when his fish traps were brimming with life and there was a good market for his catch. But for various reasons his fish-trapping operation began to fail; either the schools moved to another section of the coast, or the fish died, or the market dried up. Furthermore, by the late 1950s and early 1960s, summer boaters—most of them waterskiers and sport fishermen—began to complain about the stakes that he set his nets on. They were too close to the good beaches, they said, and made recreational boating and swimming all but impossible.

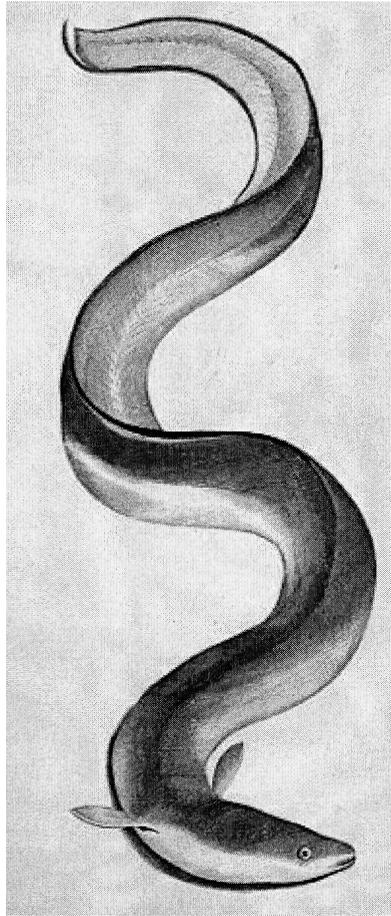
So Mr. Benjamin turned to eels and within two years had the largest single eeling operation in the area. He also tapped an excellent market. Around December each year, big buyers would show up from New York City, offer him good cigars, and order more eels than he could possibly catch. “It was for Italians,” Mr. Benjamin used to say in his parochial sort of way. “They would eat them at

Christmas, like turkey. But old folks died, and the young ones forgot the good customs and moved away.” The market died, and he was left wondering what kind of a world it is in which a tradition that is four or five hundred years old disappears in a single generation.

So he turned, finally, to his old enemies, the tourists. He began selling his eels not for food, but for bait for the fisherman in the bass derbies that were held in his town each autumn. He seemed to regret the change, but he was very old by then, and about the time that he quit fishing yet another threat loomed.

The gossip on the town dock was of diminishing populations of striped bass and, more ominous still, of toxic fish flesh rank with chemicals whose names were so complex they could only be identified by their initials. No one on the docks knew what the letters stood for; they only knew that the chemicals sounded bad and, furthermore, had been informed by greater authorities that they were indeed bad. The chemicals the fishermen couldn’t see. The diminished catches were obvious. There was, or would be, less and less need for eel bait.

By this time Mr. Benjamin was working the parking lot, taking tickets and checking beach stickers to make certain that only residents of the community used the beach. He was not very committed to his job, would often let the out-of-towners go for a swim, and would hold up others with his lectures on eels. Eels seemed to be something of a metaphor for him. Through all the wild swings



of the fish trade the eel populations had held steady, at least in his area. As long as the elvers showed up in the spring, as long as the adults moved down to the sea, his world could go on.

Then one day he heard of a massive eel kill in a nearby pond; hundreds of adult eel bodies littered the marshes. He grew weak after that, quit his job, and in autumn, by the time eel migration began, he died.

At his age, no one was surprised. He was eulogized in the local papers and the stories spoke of the good long life on the open sea. No one understood what really killed him.

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