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Eels pack plenty of mussels

Scientists reintroduce thousands to clean river

By Joseph Deinlein

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LEWISBURG — It used to be, the American freshwater eels that were found swimming in the Susquehanna River and its tributaries would simply wiggle their way up the waterway from where they spawned in the Atlantic Ocean near Bermuda.

These days, thanks to manmade obstacles blocking the way, such as the Adam T. Bower Memorial Dam at Sunbury, the fish get a ride from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Tuesday, 4,790 eels were dumped into Little Buffalo Creek at the parking lot of the Dale's Trail near the Dale-Engle-Walker House as part of a project aimed at cleaning the watershed by strengthening the native freshwater mussel population. Eels also were taken to Pine Creek near Wellsboro.

The once-plentiful eels carry the larvae of freshwater mussels — *eliptiocomplanata*, which are the primary organisms to filter water and maintain water quality in the river, said Steve Minkkinen, project leader for the Fish and Wildlife Service's Maryland Fishery Resource Office.

The project is driven by improvements to Sunbury's Riverfront along the Susquehanna River. Sunbury's project included bank stabilization, a mile long public walking trail, construction of an amphitheater and a marina along with new trees and shrubs and other changes to benefit and protect the city's waterfront area. As part of the project permit process, consulting engineers and scientists from Bucharth Horn proposed the eel stocking to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

This is the second year of a three-year program to reintroduce the eels to the ecosystem. A check of eels released last year found they were infested with the mussel larvae, which is a good thing, Minkkinen said. Minkkinen and fish biologist Ian Park released a few thousand in June and some last week.

In total, there have been about 32,000 eels dumped in local creeks. The goal is to have 60,000 released by the end of the third year.

They and the mussel population will be watched over the next 10 years, ensuring the gap created by the dam construction is being mended.

The eels released Tuesday were collected at the base of the Conowingo Dam on the Susquehanna in Maryland, Minkinen said. Though there is a mechanism there designed to help certain fish such as shad scale the dam, the eels aren't strong enough to battle the current.

"The dams have completely blocked the migration," he said. "Because their primary host hasn't been here, the mussel population has declined."

There still are mussels found in the waterways.

However, they're large and old.

The hope is the young eels — those released Tuesday were about 2 years old — will help spur the juvenile population.

The black-colored eels looked almost like large tadpoles but with powerful tails. A few almost managed to flick themselves out of the orange-colored bucket they were in temporarily before meeting their new home.

Though only about 4 inches long Tuesday, they can grow to be up to 3 feet or larger.

They will stay in the watershed, eating small insects and crayfish, for between 10 and 20 years before following the river back out to sea.

There, they will head to the Sargasso Sea, an area in the middle of the Atlantic where several currents meet, depositing there whatever they carry. The area is known for its large deposit of seaweed.

Owen Anderson, a board member of the Buffalo Creek Water Shed Alliance — a group helping with the project — said the hope is the eels will spread throughout the watershed.

"This another step in cleaning up the stream," he said.