# Lough Neagh eel fishery sidelined in response to escalating environmental crisis



Lough Neagh, Ireland's largest freshwater lake, is facing an unprecedented environmental crisis, with its only commercial fishery at the centre of a troubling narrative. The Lough Neagh Fishermen’s Co-Operative Society, which has been instrumental in managing the lake's eel fishery since its inception in 1963, recently reported that it was not consulted regarding a major action plan developed to address ongoing ecological issues. During a hearing with the Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs committee, CEO Kathleen McBride expressed dismay at being excluded from discussions led by minister Andrew Muir, highlighting the co-operative's critical role as a stakeholder in the lake's ecology and economy.

This oversight is particularly concerning as Lough Neagh has become a focal point for environmental degradation, predominantly attributed to an overload of nutrients, mainly from agricultural runoff. A staggering 60% of this nutrient influx is linked to farming practices, leading to extensive blooms of toxic blue-green algae. These blooms not only threaten the lake’s biodiversity but also pose risks to public health, raising alarms about the safety of consuming fish from the area.

The crisis has already led to significant economic repercussions. On 12 May, the co-operative announced a temporary suspension of eel fishing, a decision made to address quality concerns regarding the fat content of the catch. Typically, around 80% of Lough Neagh's eels are exported to the Netherlands daily, where they undergo smoking—a process reliant on higher fat levels. Fishermen like Dee McElroy have witnessed a stark decline in the local ecosystem, noting issues such as the disappearance of crucial food sources like “The Lough Neagh Fly,” which supports both fish and bird populations. “Every year we wait for the fly population to rise in April and that feeds all fish and birds,” he lamented, reflecting on changes not seen in his lifetime.

Meanwhile, as environmental conditions worsen, many local fishermen have been forced to divert their efforts to other species, including roach and perch, in order to sustain their livelihoods. The situation, described as akin to an ecological and biodiversity crisis by the Northern Ireland Assembly, has prompted calls for comprehensive legislation to support recovery efforts.

Further complicating matters, the presence of invasive species like the Zebra Mussel exacerbates transparency issues in the water, which can intensify harmful algal blooms due to increased sunlight penetration. This decline in water quality has sparked initiatives from local universities, such as Queen's University Belfast, which is spearheading research efforts aimed at developing sustainable solutions to revive the lake's ecosystem.

The Lough Neagh saga extends beyond environmental concerns; it encapsulates a cultural legacy that has supported local communities for generations. Sinn Féin councillor Catherine Nelson has emphasised the significance of preserving eel fishing, stating that it is central to the local economy and heritage. As discussions around the action plan evolve, the need for inclusive dialogue amongst stakeholders, particularly those most impacted, becomes increasingly vital.

The plight of Lough Neagh's ecosystem is a stark reminder of the interconnectedness of environmental health, economic viability, and cultural identity. Immediate, collective action appears essential if the lake’s unique heritage and its valuable fisheries are to endure against the rising tide of environmental challenges.

### Reference Map

* Paragraph 1: [[1]](https://www.irishnews.com/news/northern-ireland/lough-neagh-eel-fishery-not-consulted-on-action-plan-to-tackle-environmental-crisis-3VLP2M3QD5E4DE7BOTI4KEW7P4/)
* Paragraph 2: [[2]](https://www.irishnews.com/news/northernirelandnews/2023/09/15/news/fishing_for_lough_neagh_eels_world_renowned_has_collapsed_fishermen_locals-3617503/), [[4]](https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-northern-ireland-66835897), [[7]](https://news.cgtn.com/news/2023-10-16/Algae-crisis-threatens-UK-Ireland-s-business-and-agriculture-1nX6MXXCzyo/index.html)
* Paragraph 3: [[1]](https://www.irishnews.com/news/northern-ireland/lough-neagh-eel-fishery-not-consulted-on-action-plan-to-tackle-environmental-crisis-3VLP2M3QD5E4DE7BOTI4KEW7P4/), [[2]](https://www.irishnews.com/news/northernirelandnews/2023/09/15/news/fishing_for_lough_neagh_eels_world_renowned_has_collapsed_fishermen_locals-3617503/)
* Paragraph 4: [[3]](https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cxe9zpzzk5ro), [[4]](https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-northern-ireland-66835897), [[5]](https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2024/2/18/disappearing-eels-and-the-fight-for-a-centuries-old-livelihood), [[6]](https://www.qub.ac.uk/Research/case-studies/reviving-lough-neagh.html)
* Paragraph 5: [[2]](https://www.irishnews.com/news/northernirelandnews/2023/09/15/news/fishing_for_lough_neagh_eels_world_renowned_has_collapsed_fishermen_locals-3617503/), [[3]](https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cxe9zpzzk5ro), [[7]](https://news.cgtn.com/news/2023-10-16/Algae-crisis-threatens-UK-Ireland-s-business-and-agriculture-1nX6MXXCzyo/index.html)
* Paragraph 6: [[1]](https://www.irishnews.com/news/northern-ireland/lough-neagh-eel-fishery-not-consulted-on-action-plan-to-tackle-environmental-crisis-3VLP2M3QD5E4DE7BOTI4KEW7P4/), [[4]](https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-northern-ireland-66835897), [[6]](https://www.qub.ac.uk/Research/case-studies/reviving-lough-neagh.html)
* Paragraph 7: [[5]](https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2024/2/18/disappearing-eels-and-the-fight-for-a-centuries-old-livelihood)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.irishnews.com/news/northern-ireland/lough-neagh-eel-fishery-not-consulted-on-action-plan-to-tackle-environmental-crisis-3VLP2M3QD5E4DE7BOTI4KEW7P4/> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.irishnews.com/news/northernirelandnews/2023/09/15/news/fishing_for_lough_neagh_eels_world_renowned_has_collapsed_fishermen_locals-3617503/> - Fishermen and locals report a collapse in fishing for Lough Neagh's globally renowned eels due to extensive toxic blue-green algae blooms. The Department of Agriculture's fish farm at Movanagher has shut down amid what is described as an unfolding environmental disaster. Fishermen are now targeting other species like roach, perch, and pallen to sustain their livelihoods during this challenging season.
3. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cxe9zpzzk5ro> - The Northern Ireland Assembly passed a motion declaring an 'ecological and biodiversity crisis' in Lough Neagh. The motion, tabled by the SDLP, highlighted the 'biodiversity and ecological breakdown' in the lake and urged the establishment of an independent Environmental Protection Agency. The motion also called for legislation to address the ongoing ecological crisis in Northern Ireland's environment.
4. <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-northern-ireland-66835897> - Environmentalists held a 'wake' for Lough Neagh to highlight concerns over the lake's deteriorating condition due to pollution and blue-green algal blooms. The event aimed to draw attention to the environmental crisis affecting the lake, which supplies a significant portion of Northern Ireland's drinking water and is home to the largest commercial wild eel fishery in Europe.
5. <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2024/2/18/disappearing-eels-and-the-fight-for-a-centuries-old-livelihood> - Fishing families around Lough Neagh express concerns over the decline in eel populations and the lack of adequate government response to the environmental crisis. Despite the return of Northern Ireland's devolved government, fishermen feel their concerns have been largely unheard, and they face economic hardships due to the declining eel numbers and the lake's deteriorating condition.
6. <https://www.qub.ac.uk/Research/case-studies/reviving-lough-neagh.html> - Queen's University Belfast researchers are addressing the environmental crisis in Lough Neagh caused by harmful algal blooms. The blooms, driven by nutrient pollution from agricultural and industrial activities, pose risks to public health, wildlife, and the local economy, including the vital commercial eel fishery. The university is leading efforts to develop sustainable solutions through interdisciplinary research and collaboration.
7. <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2023-10-16/Algae-crisis-threatens-UK-Ireland-s-business-and-agriculture-1nX6MXXCzyo/index.html> - The algae crisis in Lough Neagh is threatening the UK's and Ireland's business and agriculture sectors. Fishermen report a significant decline in eel numbers due to pollution and algal blooms, leading to a 90% reduction in income compared to the previous year. The crisis also raises public health concerns, with warnings about the safety of consuming fish from the lake due to contamination.