“Where We Feed On Eels”

The American eel is the only fish that spends its adult life in the Susquehanna River and returns to the sea to spawn and die. American eels spawn in a region of the Atlantic Ocean near Bermuda known as the Sargasso Sea. Young eels eventually work their way back to freshwater bodies like the Susquehanna River.

The American eel was an important food for Native Americans. They called this area “Swatara” meaning, “where we feed on eels.” Native Americans fished for eels in the fall using V-shaped stone walls or “weirs” that were built in the river to trap eels migrating downstream.

While American eels still exist in the Susquehanna, their numbers have plummeted. In 1904, the first of four hydroelectric dams was constructed on the Susquehanna. The dams blocked the eels’ traditional migration route. Today, however, the utility companies are working cooperatively with migratory fish experts to develop safe and efficient passage for young eels at the dams.

European settlers commercially fished for eels until the early 1900s. An estimated one million pounds of eel were taken each year from the Susquehanna around the turn of the 20th century. The official shield of Swatara Township, located a few miles north, contains the image of an American Eel — a symbol of its eel fishery heritage.