Reproduction of European Eel in Aquaculture (REEL): Consolidation and new production methods

Project aim: Enhance methods and technology applied to produce and culture European eel larvae as basis for the development of a future self-sustained eel aquaculture.

Background: The severe decline of the European eel stock calls for conservation measures including national eel management plans and establishment of a self-sustained eel aquaculture. In 2005, the National Institute of Aquatic Resources at the Technical University of Denmark (DTU Aqua), the Faculty of Life Sciences at Copenhagen University (KU-Life) and the eel aquaculture industry started to build up a research and technology platform for the development of methods to reproduce European eel in aquaculture. Two major projects: Artificial Reproduction of Eels II and III (ROE II and III) succeeded during 2005-2008 to produce viable eggs and larvae that lived up to 12 days. The larvae thereby accomplished the yolk-sac stage and became ready to start feeding. The results were in particular promising because they evidenced that methods successfully applied to Japanese eel has a potential for application also to the European eel. ROE II and III were supported by the Ministry of Food, Agriculture and Fisheries and the European Commission through the Financial Instrument for Fisheries Guidance (FIFG) and the Danish Food Research Program 2006, respectively.

Results: The REEL project accomplished through three series of experiments to consolidate previous results. The longevity of larvae was extended from 12 to 20 days after hatch in first feeding experiments thereby entering the leptocephalus phase. Maturation potential and methods to induce maturation were further tested, and farmed and wild eel broodstocks as well as different treatments were compared. In particular, fertilisation procedures to produce fertilised eggs and embryos and monitoring techniques were enhanced. The technology needed to culture embryos and larvae was substantially improved. The potential for new hormonal treatments was explored and recombinant eel hormones have been produced. New broodstock diets were developed with focus on the lipid composition essential for development and survival of fish larvae. In addition, the experimental facility established by DTU Aqua at Lyksvad Fish Farm was enhanced by improving the experimental and laboratory facilities. The REEL project provided the basis for the establishment of an EU collaborative research project: Reproduction of European Eel: Towards a Self-sustained Aquaculture (PRO-EEL) coordinated by DTU Aqua. REEL included the partners DTU Aqua, KU-Life, Danish Eel Farmers Association (DEFA), Billund Aquaculture Service (BA), BioMar, and Bioneer of which four are integrated in the PRO-EEL project that in total has 15 international partners.
Reproduction of European eel in aquaculture: Consolidation and new production methods (REEL) (38398)

Project aim: Enhance methods and technology applied to produce and culture European eel larvae as basis for the development of a future self-sustained eel aquaculture.

Background: The severe decline of the European eel stock calls for conservation measures including national eel management plans and establishment of a self-sustained eel aquaculture. In 2005, DTU Aqua, University of Copenhagen and the eel aquaculture industry started to build up a research and technology platform for the development of methods to reproduce European eel in aquaculture.

Two major projects: Artificial Reproduction of Eels II and III (ROE II and III) succeeded during 2005-2008 to produce viable eggs and larvae that lived up to 12 days. The larvae thereby accomplished the yolk sac stage and became ready to start feeding. The results were in particular promising because they evidenced that methods successfully applied to Japanese eel have a potential for application also to European eel. ROE II and III LC were supported by the Danish Ministry of Food, Agriculture and Fisheries and the Financial Instrument for Fisheries Guidance (FIFG) and RO III by the Danish Food Research Program 2006.

Results: The REEL project has accomplished through three series of experiments to consolidate previous results and extend the longevity of larvae from 12 to 20 days after hatch in first feeding experiments. Methods to induce maturation were further tested, and farmed and wild eel broodstocks and different treatments were compared. In particular, fertilization procedures to produce fertilized eggs and embryos and monitoring techniques were enhanced. The technology needed to culture embryos and larvae was substantially improved. The potential for new hormonal treatments was explored and recombinant eel hormones have been produced. New broodstock diets were developed with focus on the lipid composition essential for development and survival of fish larvae. In addition, the experimental facility established by DTU Aqua at Lyksvad Fishfarm was enhanced by improving the experimental and laboratory facilities. The REEL project has provided the basis for the establishment of an EU research project: Reproduction of European Eel: Towards a Self-sustained Aquaculture (PRO-EEL) (38793) coordinated by DTU Aqua. REEL included the partners DTU Aqua, the Danish Eel Producers Association, Billund Aquaculture, BioMar, Bioneer and Copenhagen University of which four are integrated in PRO-EEL.

The project was coordinated by DTU Aqua.

National Food Institute
National Institute of Aquatic Resources
Section for Marine Ecology and Oceanography
University of Copenhagen
Bioneer A/S
Danish Eel Farmers Association
Billund Aquaculture Service Aps
BioMar A/S

Period: 01/01/2009 → 31/12/2010
Number of participants: 8
Research areas: Marine Populations and Ecosystem Dynamics & Fish Biology

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Artificial reproduction of eels: Phase III (ROE III) (38187)
The steady decline of the European eel stock has adverse consequences for the Danish eel aquaculture as all eel farming is at present capture based relying on wild caught glass eels. In 2005, DTU Aqua, University of Copenhagen and the eel aquaculture industry started to build up a research and technology platform for the development of methods to reproduce European eel in aquaculture.

The focus of ROE III was to follow up the pioneering work on artificial reproduction of European eels performed in the preceding pilot projects ROE I and II. The projects ROE II and III were a collaboration among DTU Aqua, University of Copenhagen and the eel aquaculture industry following up an initial survey ROE I of suited methodology lead by University of Copenhagen.

ROE III comprised the following activities:
(i) Experimental series with different treatment schemes and hormone dosage to improve the maturation process and optimize gamete quality;
(ii) Development of methods to monitor the maturation process on individual level using ultrasound scanning technology and ovary biopsy;
(iii) Analysis of broodstock fishes and improvement of the dietary fatty acid composition;
(iv) Investigation of parameters determining egg quality during incubation;
(v) First-feeding trials with eel larvae testing both artificial and live feed.

Three experimental series were completed focusing on methods for broodstock enhancement, maturation and fertilization plus culture of eggs and larvae. Already during the first experimental series, larvae accomplishing the entire yolk sac stage were achieved for the first in history for European eel. The yolksac larvae developed successfully during the period were they entirely depend on nutrition sources i.e yolk and lipid of maternal origin. The larvae were ready to start feeding day 12 post hatch. During the second experimental series, larval longevity was extended to 18 days during first feeding experiments. These recent results are a major breakthrough because they show for the first time that artificial hormone treatment can lead to viable offspring in European eel. Eggs and yolksac larvae were obtained from different hormonal treatments and mass hatchings were regularly obtained. Larval feeding using live and artificial larval feeds developed in collaboration with the food company BioMar were developed towards the end of the experiments and are ready for testing in new and coming projects.

The success of this project on improved methods, quality criteria and larval survival has led to form the basis of the project: Reproduction of European eel in aquaculture: Consolidation and new production methods and later (REEL) (38398) and later the EU FP project: Reproduction of European eel in Aquaculture: Towards a self-sustained aquaculture (PRO-EEL) (38793).

The project was coordinated by DTU Aqua.

National Institute of Aquatic Resources
Section for Marine Ecology and Oceanography
University of Copenhagen
Bioneer A/S
Danish Eel Farmers Association
Billund Aquaculture Service Aps
Period: 01/01/2007 → 31/12/2009
Number of participants: 9
Research areas: Marine Populations and Ecosystem Dynamics & Fish Biology
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