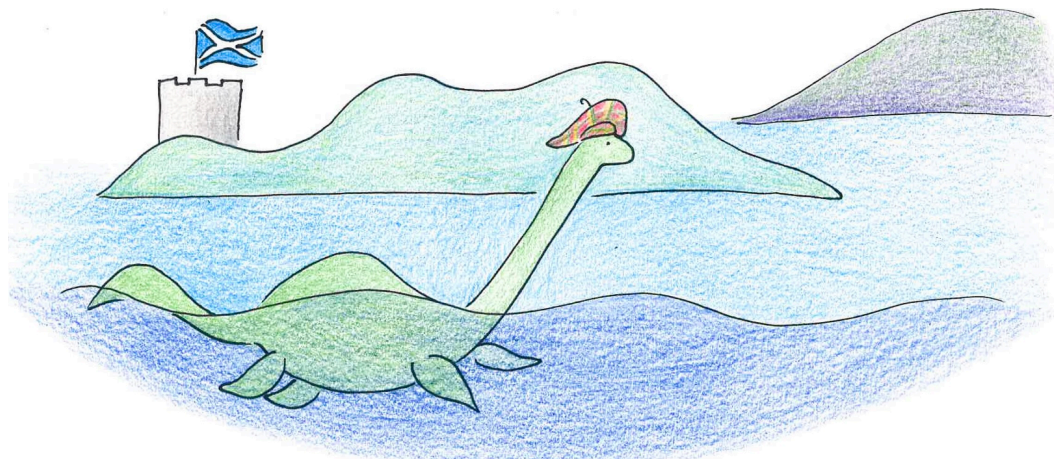


The Beauty and the Beast: a tale from Madeira Island

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All over the world many have heard of a mysterious creature so rarely seen that we do not know if it really existed or if it is a product of human imagination: Nessie. It is known as such because, according to the story, it exists in a loch in Scotland called Loch Ness. Over 1500 years ago the first stories of this 'monster' appeared — a mixture of snake and dinosaur that swims beneath the surface of the water, emerging as it wishes. If some are afraid of this creature, others seek it out, hoping to prove that it is real.

Hidden in the streams of Madeira is also an animal that only few claim to have seen and that arouses different feelings: the European eel — also called iró or eiró. Many of the people who live here have never seen or heard of this fish, but the older ones with memories of other times, when the diet was poorer and scarcer, remember catching them to eat. For some, this creature is remembered as a 'delicacy', for others it barely left an impression. But few imagine the secrets that the eel hides and the risks it faces.

European eels can be found in Madeira's streams, but this is not where they are born. In the Sargasso Sea (in the western part of the Atlantic Ocean), little larvae called leptocephalus, resembling small leaves, appear and travel to different parts of the world. Some go to North Africa, others to the European continent, or even to islands in the Atlantic Ocean — like Madeira. In doing so, these larvae travel up to 7000 kilometres — a distance seven times greater than the journey from Funchal to Lisbon. Close to the coast, they change shape, becoming cylindrical and elongated — into the form most recognise them by, but still without colour. The changes don't stop there!

When the eels leave the oceans and start living in coastal areas, rivers, streams and lakes, their colour changes and, little by little, they turn yellowish. At this stage they start to grow, from about 6cm to 20cm, some reaching up to 80cm. That is, they go from the size of a little finger to the size of a forearm or even an arm. When they are 5-20 years old, their eyes get bigger, their skin becomes thicker and more grey, and their stomach and intestines get smaller. Now, in the last stage of their lives, they make the journey back to the place where they were born — the Sargasso Sea — where they will reproduce and start a new generation.



Like other fish, the eel lives in water and moves by swimming. But it is also different. The European eel is able to live in the sea, streams, rivers and lakes. And the adult eel, with its elongated, cylindrical body, can hide under rocks and even move out of the water, making a snake-like zigzag motion. It is because of its unusual appearance and slippery skin — so different from many fish — that some people ‘turn up their noses’ when they see this animal. But there is no need to be alarmed. This animal, harmless to humans, uses its body shape to hide under rocks to escape predators or catch the insects it feeds on. Unfortunately, these fascinating tricks are of little use when it comes to facing the challenges posed by man.

In the last 40 years, the number of European eels has decreased by 90%. It would be as if most of the island of Madeira disappeared and only Funchal remained. Many eels have been fished. In rivers and streams, they often find polluted waters, with man-made structures that prevent them from reaching places that were once their home. These and other dangers make the eel a threatened species — more threatened than the panda bear, the Iberian lynx or the sea lion.

We don't know if Nessie really existed, nor do we know what it was, although some believe it may have been a huge eel. The story of the Nessie is fascinating, but no more so than that of the eel that lives on the island of Madeira. It is time to find out more about this docile, mysterious and incredible animal so that, unlike Nessie, it remains in the real and not the imaginary world.