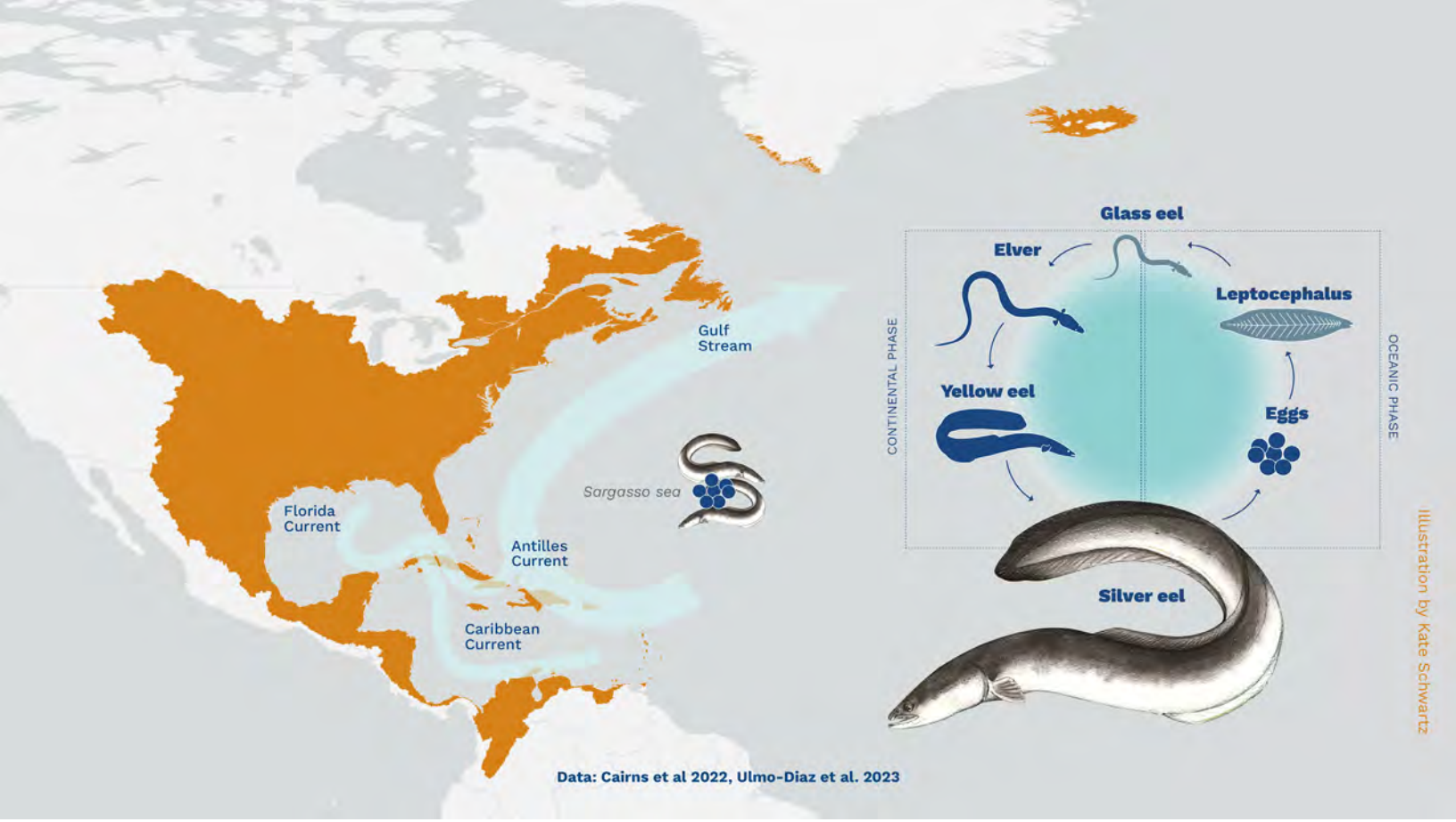


Kiawerón:ko (American eel, *Anguilla rostrata*) lifecycle and plausible range in orange.

THE ART OF THE EEL

By Mary Ann Perron, Abraham Francis, Erin Smith, Kayla Sunday, Mackenzie Wylie-Arbic, Stephany Hildebrand, Yanik Rozon & Anthony Wallace

"Kiawerón:ko. Relative, connector, medicine, and mystery."

KIAWERÓN:KO, KANIEN'KÉHA (Mohawk for American eel, *Anguilla rostrata*) is a fish species that undertakes an incredible migration spanning thousands of kilometers between the Sargasso Sea, where they are born, and their rearing habitats. As a *panmictic* species—meaning every individual belongs to a single breeding pool—all Kiawerón:ko are connected to one another. Whether they mature in the waters of South America, Greenland, Lake Ontario, or Kaniatarawane:neh (the "great waterway," referring to the St. Lawrence River), they all hatch together in the Sargasso Sea. The abundance of Kiawerón:ko has dramatically diminished, especially within Kaniatarawane:neh watershed, where numbers have fallen as low as 1% of their historic levels.

This statistical collapse echoes the stories told by Akwesasronon, who have observed this change over generations. It is our collective responsibility to prevent the loss of this ecologically and culturally important species and ensure its survival for those to come.

In the summer and fall of 2025, the St. Lawrence River Institute set out to celebrate and reconnect people with Kiawerón:ko as part of the Great River Rapport, a holistic ecosystem health assessment addressing community concerns in the Upper St. Lawrence River. The celebration of Kiawerón:ko through a call for art was carried out in partnership with the Mohawk Council of Akwesasne, Abraham Francis, Dr. Kathleen Vaughan and her team at Concordia University, and with the support of the

Brace Water Centre at McGill University and the Natural Resources Institute at the University of Greenwich, UK.

The submissions showcased a wide range of creativity and originality. We received over 60 art pieces including poems, paintings, beaded works, and quilts. The call for art benefited greatly from the diverse partnerships established as part of the Great River Rapport, which resulted in submissions from different regions along the range of Kiawerón:ko, including many Indigenous artists. The artist statements told stories of personal journeys alongside Kiawerón:ko. We found that some people had a depth of knowledge of Kiawerón:ko, while others were introduced to the species through this call for art. We were excited to see that people took time to learn about the threats to Kiawerón:ko and its precarious status in the river while creating their artworks.

While the call for art engaged many people in Kaniatarawane:neh watershed and beyond, there are still more people who do not yet know about the challenges that Kiawerón:ko face in completing their lifecycle. In Kaniatarawane:neh, this perilous journey includes surviving the passage through turbine blades at two hydropower dams, the Moses-Saunders Power Dam and the Beauharnois Hydroelectric Facility, which collectively kill 44% of outmigrating Kiawerón:ko every year. Additional threats from habitat loss, fishing pressures, invasive species, contamination, and climate change also negatively impact Kiawerón:ko and reduce their ability to thrive as they once did.

Our call for art successfully connected people from all walks of life to this important species, fostering a sense of caretaking. Without caretaking, Kiawerón:ko face the threat of disappearing from our river, along with the medicines, story, language, and culture they bring. They are teachers.

Over the past decades, various initiatives have been dedicated to finding ways to mitigate the threats, though the numbers remain at all-time lows. Thankfully, there is hope. New technology in the form of fish-friendly turbines show great promise and could potentially allow the safe passage of Kiawerón:ko at hydropower dams.

With the amendments to the Canadian Fisheries Act in 2019, Canada is now well-positioned to assess mitigation options to support the recover of Kiawerón:ko. For this

“Without caretaking, Kiawerón:ko face the threat of disappearing from our river, along with the medicines, story, language, and culture they bring.”



The top adult submission, titled “Sisters in Survival.”

Artist statement: Pollution, environmental change and the massive turbines of the power dams on the rivers have decimated the eels as they return to the sea to spawn. The quilt depicts the baby eels in the ocean and the healthy eels traveling to their freshwater homes. It also depicts the eels after passing through the turbines. Haudenosaunee and our neighbors are also affected by the environmental changes and our way of life is in jeopardy. The Wampum people represent the Haudenosaunee Confederacy Nations along the St. Lawrence River watershed. The quilt is 75 inches by 76 inches, made of cotton, wool and glass beads. Created and sewn by Iakonikonkonriiosta, 2025. Mature Eel drawn by Gareoji Shoma, 2025. Quilted by Robynne Dorion, 2025. Beadwork by Anna Thompson, 2025.



Top youth submission by Sawyer F. who loves the river.

to become a reality, support from the public needs to be combined with respect for Indigenous Rights, enforcement from government agencies, and buy-in from industry. Through the call for art, we were encouraged to see that community members are looking for ways to connect with nature. We look forward to finding news ways to inspire people to connect with the natural world and share the story of Kiawerón:ko—through conversations, art, and other creative outlets. Such meaningful engagement can foster the love and care required to protect these relatives.

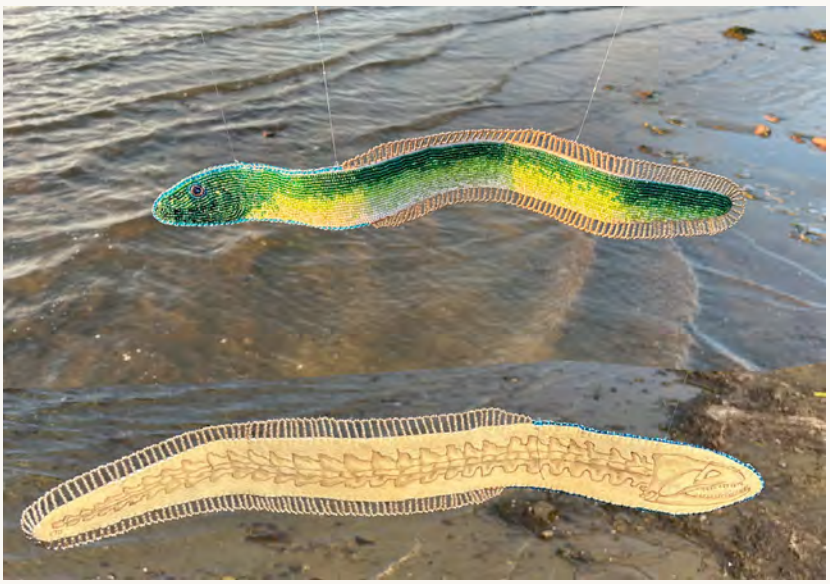
"Let us construct communities of caretaking for all of creation—our futures are woven together!"

Authors from the River Institute include Mary Ann Perron, Liber Ero postdoctoral fellow; Erin Smith, post-doctoral researcher; Mackenzie Wylie-Arbic, research assistant; Stephany Hildebrand, visual communications coordinator; and Anthony Wallace, visual communications coordinator. Abraham Francis is Akwesasronon and a Ph.D. candidate at Clarkson University. Kayla Sunday is the head of the environment program at the Mohawk Council of Akwesasne. Yanik Rozon is an Indigenous Protected and Conserved Areas coordinator at Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society.



The most thought-provoking, titled "Profit over Preservation."

Artist statement: The silent ecocide of the American Eel population. Many left slaughtered and suffering at the hands of the razor-sharp turbines from hydropower dams. Over 99% of American Eels have been lost in the St. Lawrence River. An ecosystem forever changed. By Jessica Farmer.



The most creative by Kaysun Oke. First side fully beaded (full of life) back side is leather with pyrography design.