One of the largest lakes in Europe, Lough Neagh’s 157 square miles wash the shores of five of Northern Ireland’s six counties.

Lough Neagh is the largest wild eel fishery in Europe, producing 550 tons of brown eels and 150 tons of silver eels annually. Ninety percent of the eels are shipped immediately to London, The Netherlands, and Germany. Most are smoke cured and sold as highly prized delicacies.

Lough Neagh has been commercially fished since 2000 B.C.E. In the mid-1600s, King Charles I granted the Earl of Donegal fishing rights to Lough Neagh, which sparked off a centuries-long struggle by locals. They regained control in 1972, when the Lough Neagh Fishermen’s Co-operative Society was established. Catches are carefully regulated by the Society to guard against overfishing.

Lough Neagh eels begin their lives as “elvers” in the Saragossa Sea. The Gulf Stream carries them back to Ireland, where they live for up to fourteen years before they return to the Saragossa to spawn.

Lough Neagh was created when the giant Finn Mac Cool, in an evil temper, picked up a boulder from the center of Ulster and hurled it into the North Sea. The boulder became the Isle of Man; the hole filled with water and became Lough Neagh.

—Ancient Irish Legend