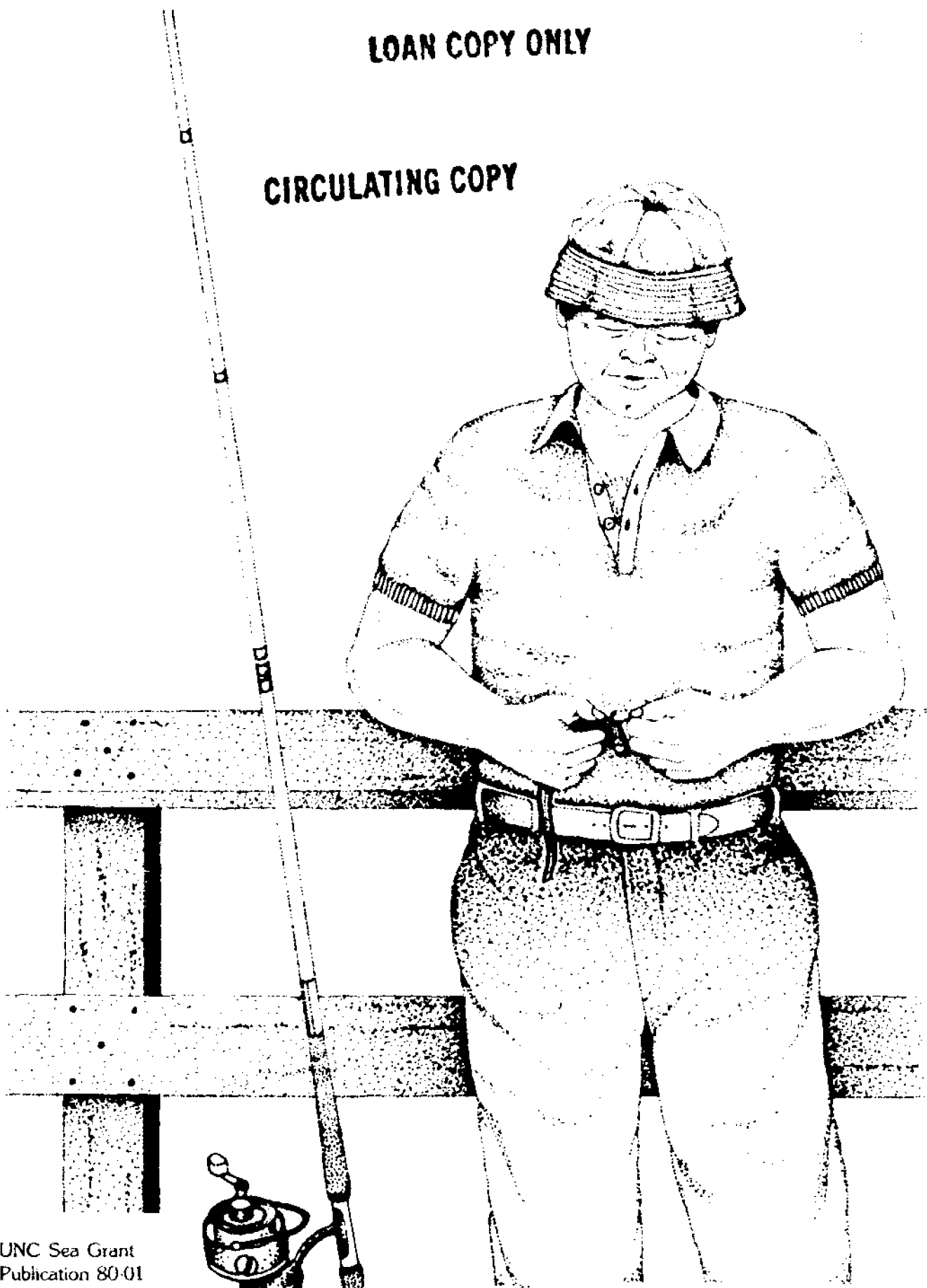


How to use Eels as Bait

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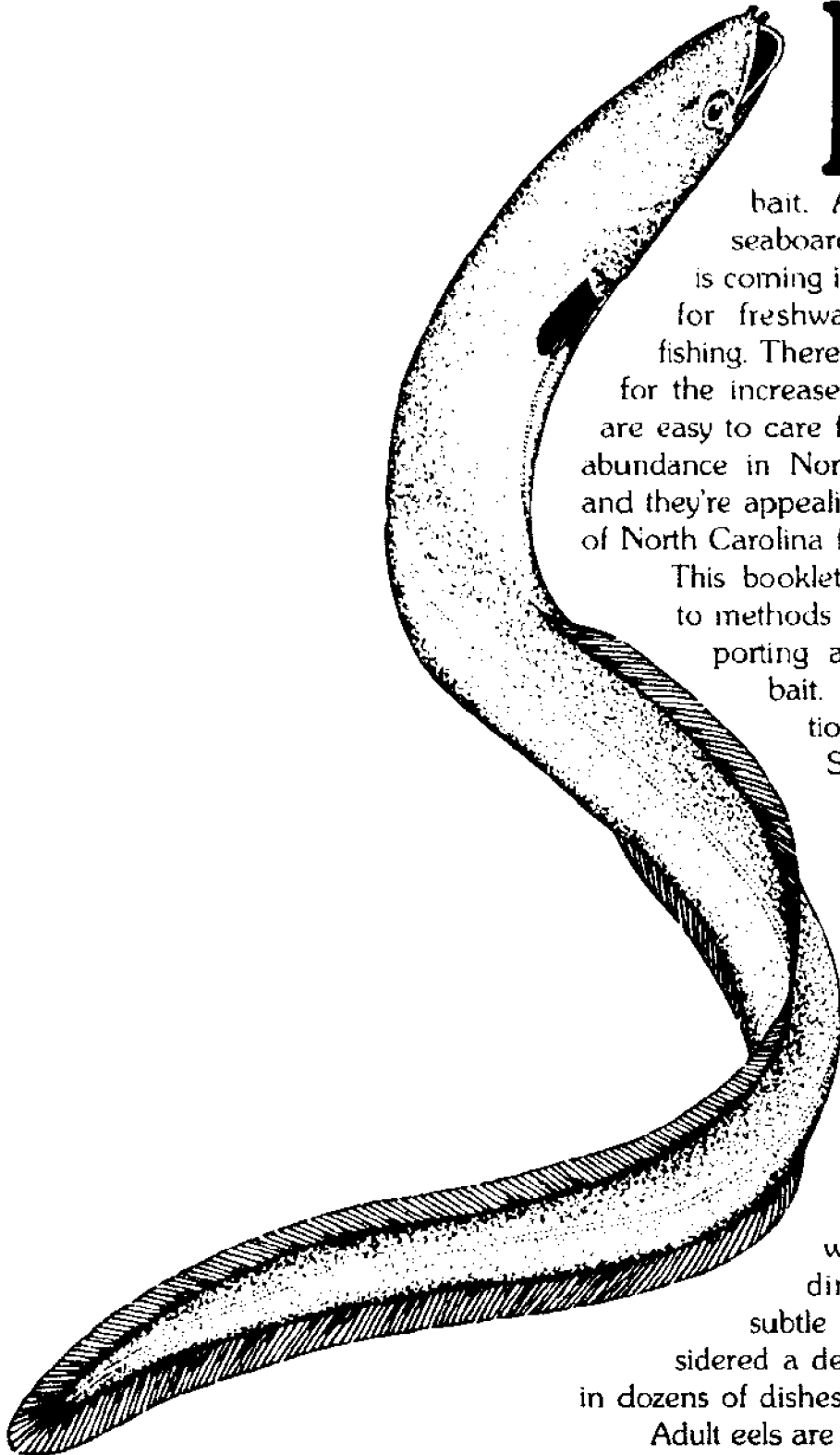
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Credits

*Written by Leon Abbas and
Mary Day Mordecai,
UNC Sea Grant College Program.*

Designed and illustrated by John Kirtz.



If you're like most sport fishermen, you're always in the market for good

bait. Along the Eastern seaboard, the American eel is coming into its own as a bait for freshwater and saltwater fishing. There are several reasons for the increase in popularity: Eels are easy to care for, they're found in abundance in North Carolina waters, and they're appealing to a wide variety of North Carolina fish.

This booklet is an introduction to methods of caring for, transporting and rigging eels as bait. For more information, contact any of Sea Grant's agents.

The American eel is a long bony fish that, until recently, has been spurned in the United States.

Not so in the Orient and Europe, where the creature finds its way to the finest of dinner platters. Its subtle white meat is considered a delicacy and is served in dozens of dishes.

Adult eels are fished commercially in the eastern United States, but most of

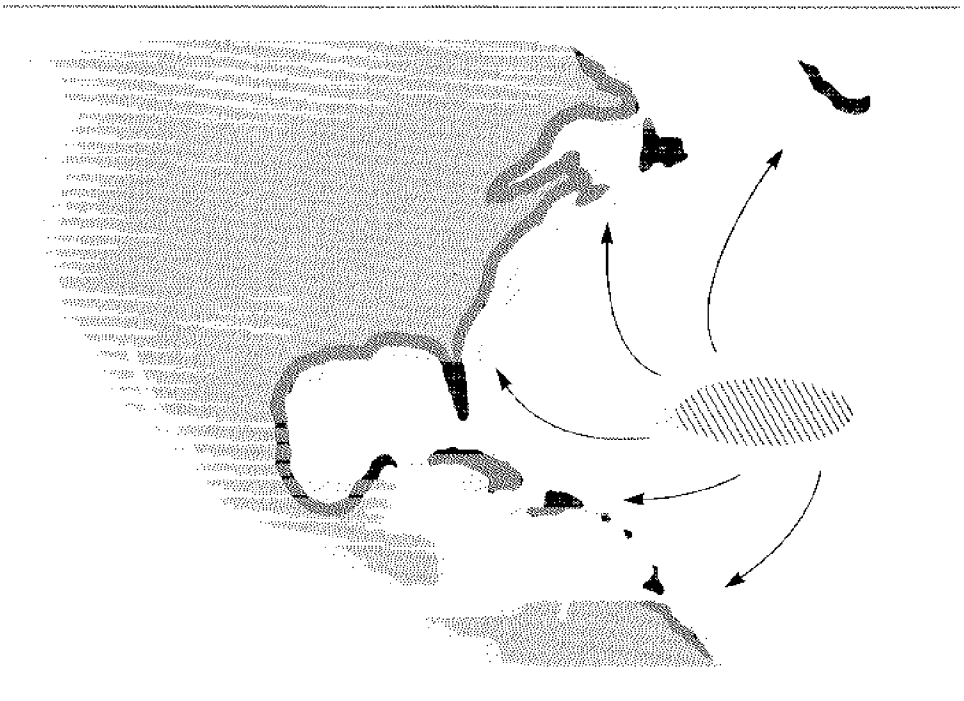
the catch is exported. A small, but steadily growing, portion is being sold as bait to sport fishermen in this country.

Though it spends most of its life in fresh water, the American eel spawns in the legendary Sargasso Sea, a large section of the Atlantic Ocean southwest of Bermuda. The tiny, transparent larval eels are shaped like willow oak leaves. Shortly after they hatch, the larvae launch a six- to 12-month journey, riding slowly on the Gulf Stream and other currents. Headed for fresh water, they move inland anywhere from the

Gulf of Mexico to Greenland. Many of them enter North Carolina's waters.

As they approach shore, the larval eels undergo a metamorphosis, becoming rounded, transparent "glass eels." Once they enter fresh coastal waters, they take on the pigment of the adults. At this stage, they are about three inches long and the thickness of a pencil lead. They are usually called elvers.

These carnivorous young eels feed in fresh waters until they begin to mature six to 13 years later. The yellow-green American eel found in North



Larval eels ride on currents from the Sargasso Sea to inland waters

Carolina waters reaches an average length of eight to 16 inches. During the late fall, the mature eels turn a silver color and begin their migration back to the Sargasso Sea. There, the cycle begins again.

Where to find them

Of course, you may catch your own eels in North Carolina's rivers and sounds. Eels also can be purchased at some bait stores along the coast. But since live eels are relatively new bait to North Carolina fishermen, not all dealers carry them.

How to carry them

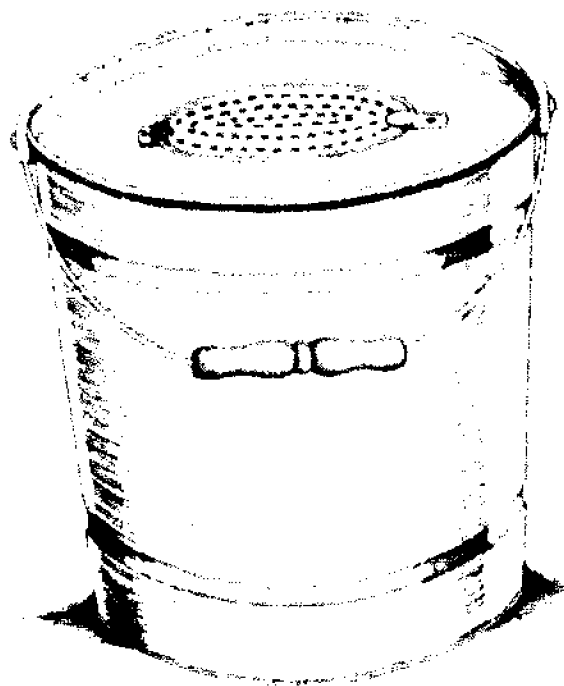
The secret to fishing with eels is to keep them alive and healthy. This means that you must be careful about storing and transporting them.

Eels adapt well to the method of transport usually used for live minnows. You may store them in a bait container. Don't forget to change the water frequently to maintain a cool temperature and an adequate oxygen supply.

Another convenient method of transporting eels is to place them along with some crushed ice in a small plastic bag. Punch a few small holes in the bottom of the bag to let the water run out. This is important. If completely submerged in the water, the eels will soon drown. It's also a good idea to keep eels in a shaded, cool area, such as a cooler or bait well.

Or, pile wet seaweed or other

marine vegetation in the bottom of a container. Put the eels on top, placing more vegetation over them to keep their skins and gills moist. As long as they are cool and moist, eels can live several hours.



Minnow bucket

How to rig them

Several species of fish along the Atlantic seaboard find the eel a particularly appetizing bait. The saltwater group includes cobia, amberjack, king mackerel, bluefish, striped bass (rockfish), flounder and both speckled and gray trout. Eel lovers among the freshwater fish include largemouth bass and land-locked striped bass.

As you know, the type of rigging

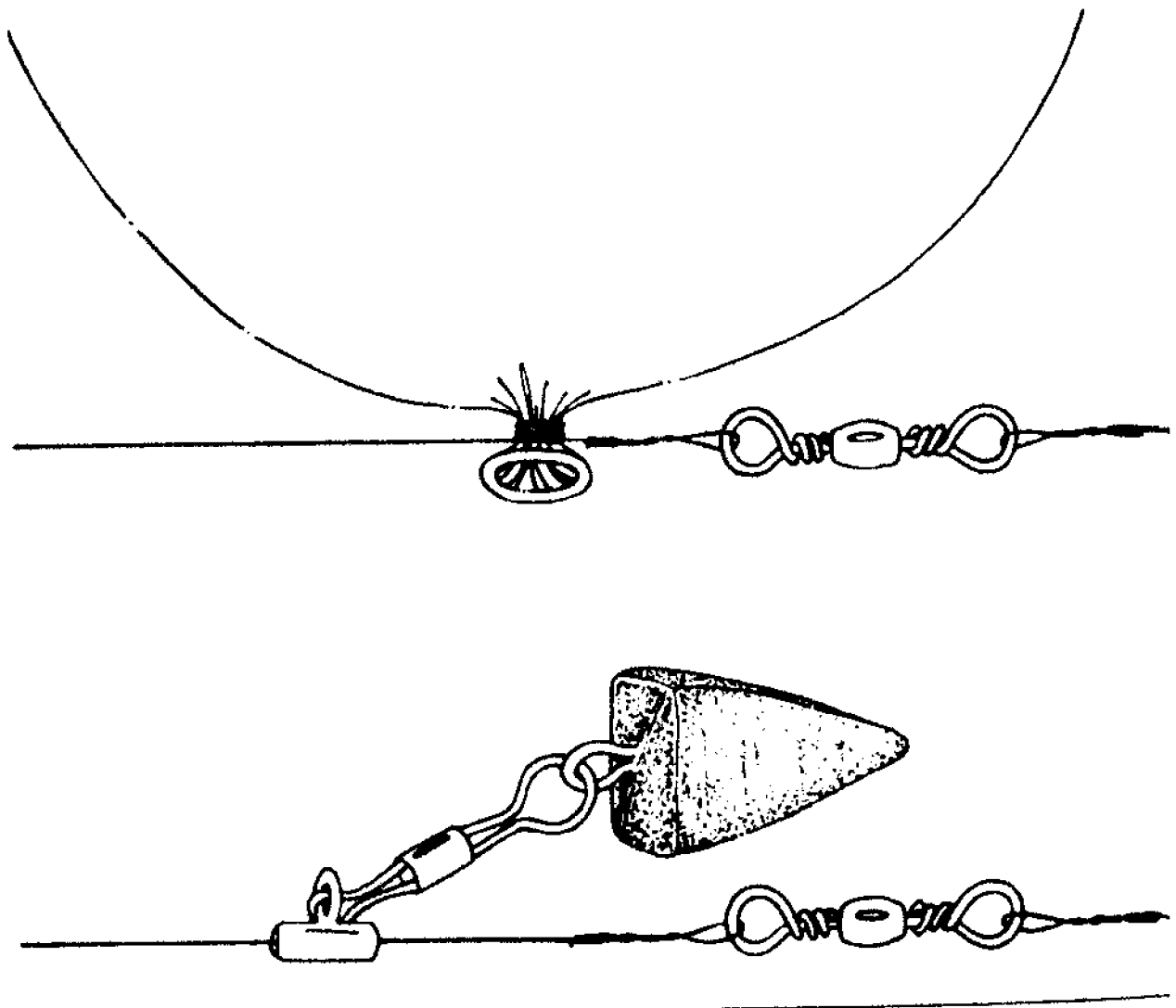
you use makes a difference in your catch. Observe and experiment until you find the right ones for your purposes. To help you get started, here are a few proven methods of rigging:

Saltwater fishing

Fishing from a boat or pier: A saltwater float rig is commonly used for

fishing from a pier or boat. Tie a barrel swivel to the end of the line and, using a 3/0 to 9/0 hook, attach three to six feet of 50- to 100-pound wire or heavy monofilament leader. Tie a balloon to your line above the swivel with string or a rubber band. You can use this same rig, without the float or balloon, to fish for cobia.

Top - saltwater float, bottom - fish-finder rig



Bottom fishing This rig, commonly called the fish finder rig, can be used from a pier or boat or in the surf. You'll need a plastic sleeve with a snap, which can be found at most tackle shops. Slip the sleeve over the line and attach a pyramid or bank sinker to the snap. The sinker should be just heavy enough to prevent your line from mov-

ing around freely with waves or current. Tie a barrel swivel to the end of the line and attach about six feet of 50 to 100 pound monel, stainless steel or monofilament leader to the swivel. Use a 3/0 to 9/0 hook, depending upon the size of the eel you're planning to use as bait.

For a different rig, tie a three way swivel to the end of your line. Then tie



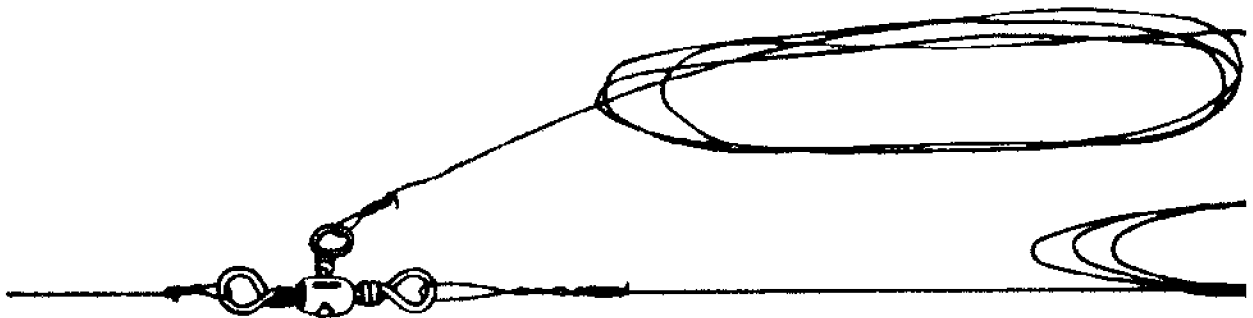
12 to 18 inches of monofilament line to the second eye of the swivel. To the other end of the line, attach a heavy pyramid or bank sinker. Attach about three feet of 50- to 100-pound wire or monofilament leader with a 3/0 to 9/0 hook to the remaining eye on the swivel.

Trolling: It's a breeze to rig eels for trolling. If you're using a monofilament

leader, you will need a rigging needle. To rig with a stiff wire leader, cut the leader slightly longer than the length of eel. Pass the needle or wire forward through the eel's anus, through the body and out the mouth. The hook will remain in the position shown.

Tie a swivel on the leader. Leave the swivel in the eel's mouth and use a

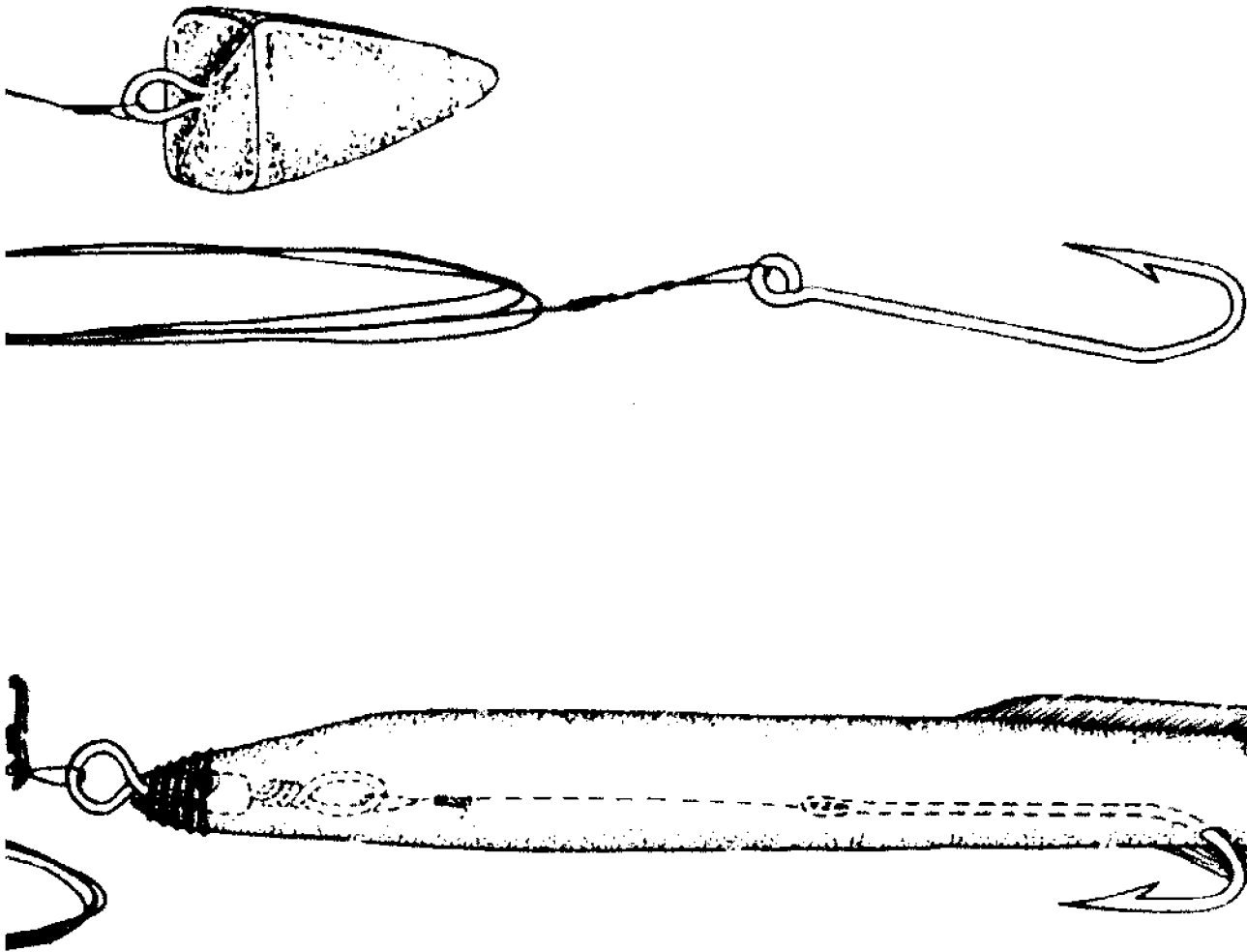
Top - rig for bottom fishing, bottom - trolling rig



copper bait wire to wrap the mouth shut around the swivel. The eel will then be pulled through the water by the head, so that it moves with a natural swimming motion. Then, tie either a monofilament or wire leader to the forward eye of the swivel. Attach another swivel to the leader and then tie to the fishing line.

Freshwater fishing

To fish for striped bass, rig eels much the way you would for fishing in salt water. Fishing for largemouth bass, however, requires lighter gear—for example, #15 monofilament line and 1/0 to 3/0 hooks. Naturally, you should also use smaller eels. You may fish either



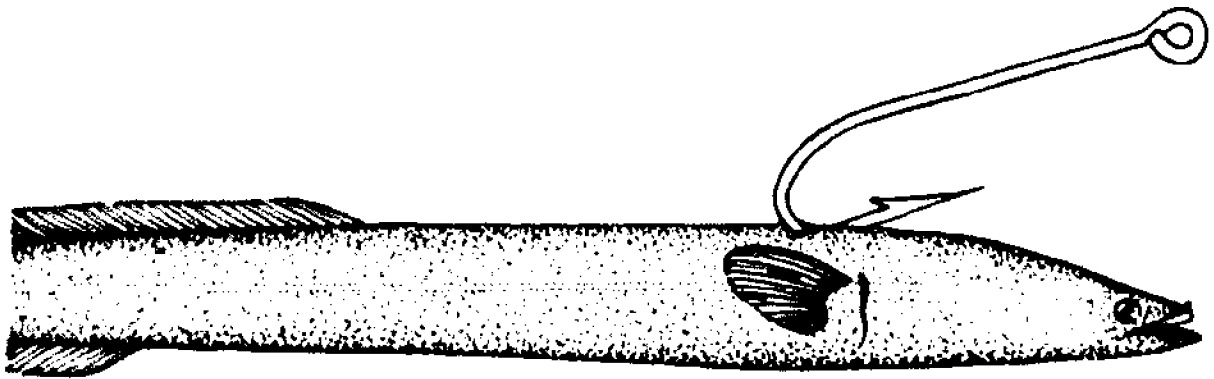
with or without a bobber. If you choose to fish without a bobber, be sure to pull the eel off the bottom periodically. Unlike other live baits, eels tend to hide in grass and under rocks.

How to hook them

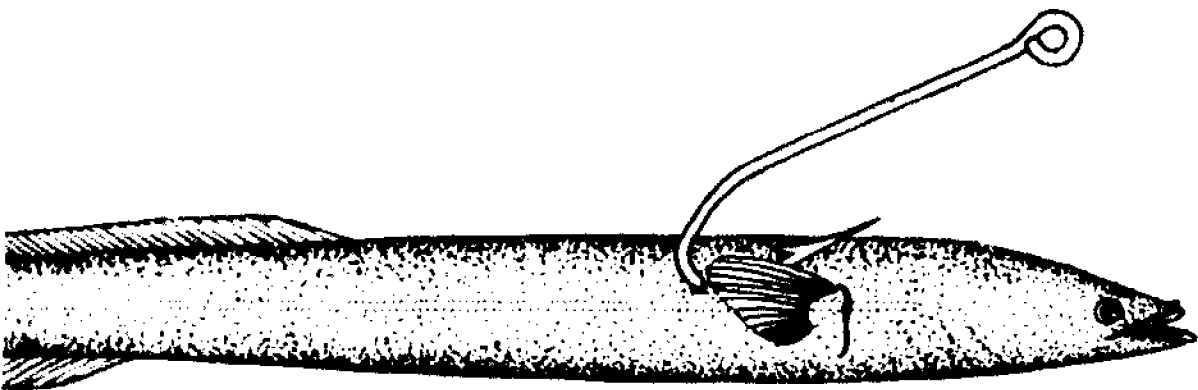
Eels have tough skin, so you'll

need a very sharp hook. They're also slippery. When baiting, hold the eel steady with a piece of dry cloth. There's no chance that an eel will hurt you, as it has a small mouth lined with tiny teeth and rarely tries to bite.

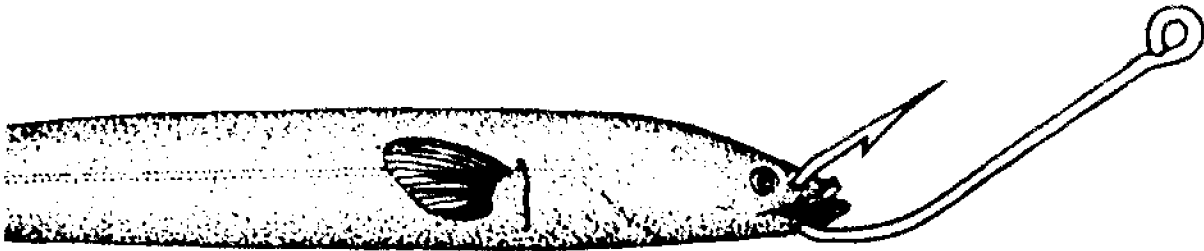
Here are a few widely accepted methods of hooking eels:



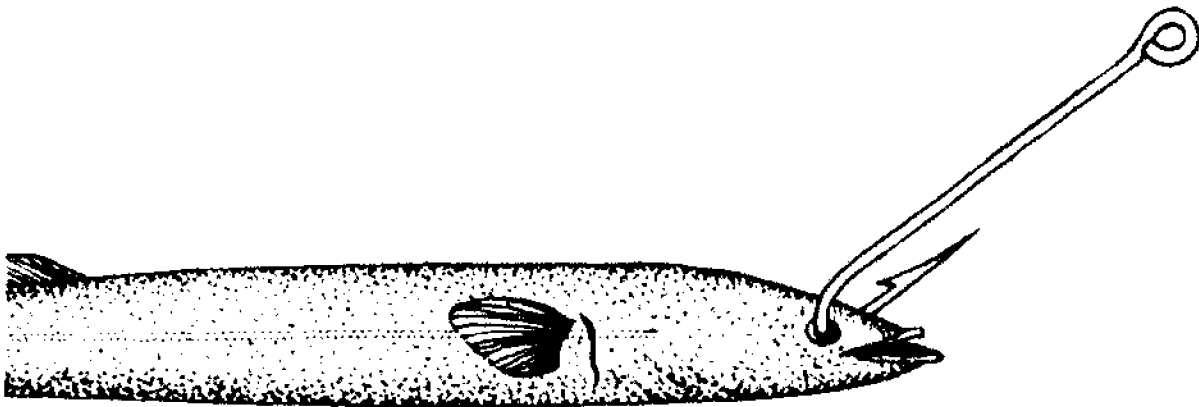
Place the hook through the back, just behind the gill opening and above the spine.



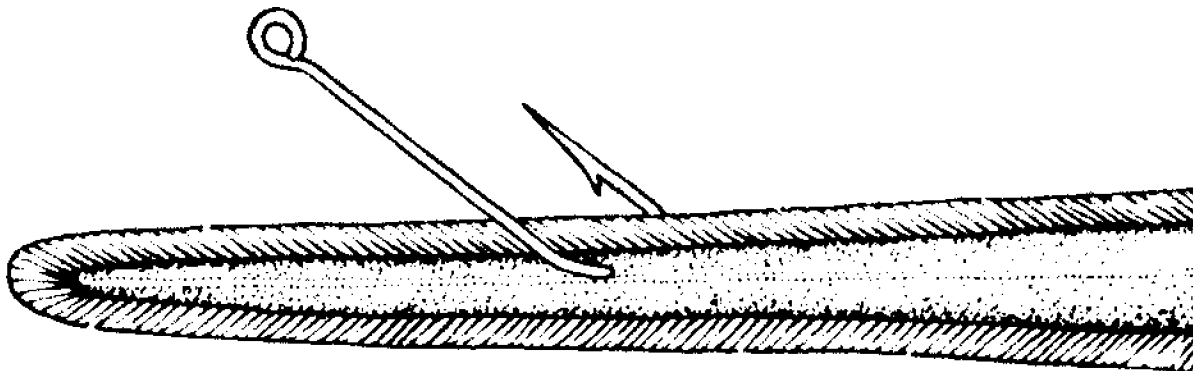
Hook the eel on either side just behind the gill cover. Pass the hook just under the skin and bring it out on the same side of the eel's body



Hook through the lower jaw and the head just in front of the eyes.



Hook through both eyes.



Hook through the eel's body under the dorsal (back) fin about one-quarter of the body length forward of the tail, avoiding the spine.

Questions?

Got a question? Call UNC Sea Grant's agents at any of the following offices:

Raleigh:
105 1911 Building
North Carolina State University
Raleigh, N. C. 27650
Phone: (919) 737-2454

Manteo:
Marine Advisory Service
Marine Resources Center/
Roanoke Island
P. O. Box 699
Manteo, N. C. 27954
Phone: (919) 473-3937

Atlantic Beach:
Marine Advisory Service
Marine Resources Center/
Boque Banks
P. O. Box 896
Atlantic Beach, N. C. 28512
Phone: (919) 726-0125

Wilmington:
Marine Advisory Service
Marine Resources Center/Fort Fisher
General Delivery
Kure Beach, N. C. 28449
Phone: (919) 458-5498



For a copy of this booklet, write:

UNC Sea Grant College Program

105 1911 Building

North Carolina State University

Raleigh, N.C. 27650
