

Comments Regarding a Striped Bass Angling Season on the Miramichi River in 2013

By Mark Hambrook, President Miramichi Salmon Association

The Department of Fisheries and Oceans (DFO) held a meeting at Metepenagiag Lodge in Red Bank on March 19, 2013 to consult on possible management scenarios regarding opening an angling season for striped bass in the Miramichi River and Gulf of St. Lawrence in 2013. DFO wants to be cautious when they open the fishery so the stocks are not rapidly depleted and any measures they choose to implement for 2013 will be reviewed next winter and modified if striped bass numbers dwindle too quickly. My comments will pertain to the Miramichi River as DFO will be consulting other groups in the Gulf of St. Lawrence regarding their expectations for a striped bass recreational fishery in 2013.

The Southern Gulf of St. Lawrence striped bass population is considered one distinct population with only one spawning area, the tidal portion of the Northwest Miramichi River. Adults spawn in late May or early June and the eggs hatch in 2 to 3 days and feed in the estuary. By July, the young bass are moving downstream and into salt water, spreading along the coast in both directions and can reach parts of Nova Scotia by late summer or early fall. Striped bass prefer warm water; if the waters are too cool during the summer, they will not grow large enough to survive the winter. The Gulf of St. Lawrence can super-chill during the winter and all striped bass have to enter rivers to overwinter, usually in the estuary near the mixing zone of fresh and salt water. They stop feeding when the temperature drops below 10⁰C. Immature bass eventually move back out into salt water in the spring and older, sexually mature fish will migrate to the Northwest Miramichi to spawn.

The spawning requirement for this population is 21,600 spawning adults in 5 out of 6 years. When DFO placed a fishing moratorium on all striped bass harvesting in 2000, the number of spawners had dropped to about 2,000 bass. The moratorium took some time to turn the population around, but by 2007 the numbers began to improve and spawning targets were met each year thereafter. An assessment did not take place in 2010, although large quantities of bass were observed and DFO was satisfied that sufficient spawners were present. By 2011, striped bass numbers were reaching 200,000 spawners and in 2012, DFO was not able to do an assessment again because of early spawning, but the observed numbers were the same as in 2011. The compliant rule of 5 out of 6 years was finally met for spawning escapement and the spawning numbers were exceeded by a factor of 10 times. DFO did not open the angling season in 2012, citing the lack of older fish in the population. A compounding factor was that the Committee of the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC) recommended that the population of striped bass be placed on the Endangered Species List as “threatened” in 2004, just as the population ironically was beginning to rebound. DFO resisted putting the bass on the Endangered Species List because of the recovery and in the fall of 2012, COSEWIC re-evaluated the status. The new designation is “special concern” and this designation was only placed on the population because of the one spawning location factor. DFO will have a few years to decide if

they will accept this designation, but this rating means that a fishery can occur as long as there is a management plan to ensure the bass are not overfished.

The MSA is concerned about having 200,000 striped bass in the Northwest Miramichi during the time the salmon smolts are migrating out to sea. There are only 500,000 to 600,000 smolts and the bass are eating voraciously at this time of year. Thankfully, there are millions of smelts in the river and the bass are feeding heavily on them. But if each bass only ate only one smolt, it could reduce the number of smolts by 50% on the Northwest at a time when sea mortality is high on smolts from all rivers. Striped bass are also in the Southwest Miramichi, but not to the same extent as in the Northwest. The Atlantic Salmon Federation (ASF), through their smolt tracking program, has observed a drop in smolt survival from the head of tide on the Southwest Miramichi to Miramichi Bay, going from 70% to 50% survival from the early 2000's to present, just as the bass numbers have increased. That amounts to a loss of 250,000 more smolts today than 10 years earlier, assuming the total run is around 1.5 million smolts. To keep the ecosystem in balance in the Miramichi, a spawning run of twice the requirement or 45,000 striped bass would be better for all species in the Miramichi River. The 200,000 spawners must be reduced to a more sustainable number for other fisheries to thrive.

At the March 19 meeting, DFO advised that notice had been served in the Canada Gazette that DFO will be taking measures to further protect striped bass, in particular "Yearly area closure for angling activities on the staging and spawning grounds of the Northwest Miramichi River between May 1 and June 30". This statement was made without consultation and will be strongly opposed by the citizens of the Miramichi area. The area that has been identified for closure is from the bridge in Newcastle crossing the Miramichi River upstream in the Northwest Miramichi River to the bridge in Red Bank and upstream in the Southwest Miramichi River to the CNR train bridge. The upper area of the Northwest Miramichi closure zone is a popular salmon and trout fishing area and the Newcastle bridge area is a popular trout fishing area within the City of Miramichi.

In the recreational salmon fishery on the Miramichi and elsewhere, salmon are pursued on their spawning run as they enter the rivers and move upstream to wait for right time of year to release their eggs. The angling season is closed along the Miramichi immediately before spawning begins and then remains closed over the winter until spring. There is probably not another fishery that is more carefully managed than Atlantic salmon angling. The Miramichi requires about 40,000 spawners to meet conservation requirements and returns of adults can range from a low of 22,000 in 2012 to a high of 75,000 in 2011. Still there is a retention fishery for Atlantic salmon and catch-and-release angling is permitted. The striped bass population is averaging 200,000 spawners in the last few years and requires only 21,600 for spawning requirements, yet DFO feels that no angling can occur in these waters where striped bass are staging. Closing angling in the spawning area during the time of spawning may be a reasonable action, but closing the staging area for angling for two months is totally unacceptable. DFO stated at the March 19 meeting that the recovery of the striped bass population could be mostly attributed to

the closure of the commercial fishery. While the population of striped bass was rebuilding over the past 12 years, there was an angling fishery for trout and salmon occurring in these bass staging and spawning waters and the numbers still rebounded from 2,000 spawners to over 200,000 spawners; in reality, there are more striped bass spawning in the Miramichi River today than in any time in living memory.

Three years ago, the Miramichi Watershed Management Committee and DFO agreed on a Variation Order to reduce mortality on striped bass and Atlantic salmon in a large area of the Miramichi Estuary by implementing an angling gear restriction that permits the use of only a single barbless hook by anglers in this area. This gear restriction permits the easy release of any fish angled and minimizes catch-and-release mortality. To our knowledge, the Miramichi Estuary is the only area in the Gulf Region that has such a restriction in tidal waters and perhaps this should be expanded to other estuaries where angling activity with multiple treble hooks may be affecting salmon, trout and striped bass populations.

If DFO feels the need to protect the spawning area for striped bass during the time of spawning, then it shouldn't be only the anglers that are affected, but all fisheries activities, since they have a greater impact on the striped bass population. For example, in the staging area that DFO proposes to close for all angling activity, there is an active gill net and trap net fisheries for salmon and gaspereau. In 2012, one fishing of a gaspereau trap had 5,000 striped bass in the net and the contents of the trap net are dipped out by a large dip net, dropped on the floor of the boat and non gaspereau fish are picked out by hand and thrown overboard. This activity would place more stress on a striped bass than an angler releasing the fish from a dip net after hooking it with a single barbless hook. There are approximately 15 gaspereau trap nets operating in the staging area, generally from the middle of May to the end of June, and are affecting more bass than all the anglers on the Northwest Miramichi. The gaspereau trap nets are located in the staging area and the spawning area occurs just upstream of the upper most trap net. A suggested closure area to protect striped bass when they are spawning is from the mouth of the Northwest Millstream upstream to the mouth of Sutherland Brook. The one kilometer area between Sutherland Brook and the Red Bank Bridge is one of the heaviest fished areas in the Northwest Miramichi during the early salmon and trout season and covers part of the Metepenagiag First Nation where many from the aboriginal community angle. Striped bass don't spawn in this small area, but sometimes will go above this area with the tide. Metepenagiag also operates a salmon trap net below the Red Bank Bridge that also falls in this small area. Closing this area to non-aboriginal anglers will create bitter feelings in the community, if aboriginal anglers are the only ones permitted to fish. DFO has to be careful to respect aboriginal rights, but not create racial tensions in the area through arbitrary policies.

DFO has proposed a cautious management plan for the opening of a striped bass angling fishery. There will be an allocation of striped bass to the various First Nations in the Southern Gulf of St. Lawrence and DFO has not yet begun these negotiations. The angling retention fishery will only be for a short period of time, perhaps 10 – 14 days and the limit will probably only be one

fish/day. The retention season could be different from one part of the Gulf to another, with August the most likely time for most marine harvesting throughout the Gulf. Since there are very few bass in the Miramichi River in August, this season would not be appropriate for this area. A season that starts May 1 and goes for 10 – 15 days would be more appropriate and since this is a trial season in 2013, Miramichi anglers and aboriginal fishers would be the only ones to harvest a portion of the 2013 spawners, which should be over 200,000 bass, far more than is required for successful propagation. The season in August in the rest of the Gulf would harvest post-spawners and immature striped bass and not affect the 2013 spawning.

A management plan for a striped bass fishery in the Miramichi River from the Centennial Bridge in Chatham upstream should be:

- A catch-and-release fishery for striped bass would be permitted in the Miramichi River, upstream of the Centennial Bridge in Miramichi to the Red Bank Bridge on the Northwest Miramichi and Doyles Brook on the Southwest Miramichi from April 15 to October 15, where only a single barbless hook is permitted to be used by anglers.
- From May 16 to June 15, the striped bass spawning grounds from the mouth of the Northwest Millstream upstream to the mouth of Sutherland Brook on the Northwest Miramichi would be closed to all angling and other fisheries activities.
- A retention angling fishery would be permitted for one striped bass/day from May 1 to May 15 upstream of the Centennial Bridge in Chatham.

A successful recreational striped bass fishery can be permitted on the Miramichi and other parts of the Gulf of St. Lawrence in a responsible manner so that bass numbers never drop below spawning requirements. This can be done without placing restrictions on salmon and trout anglers from angling in their traditional fishing areas for a two month period. Protecting the spawning grounds when the striped bass are spawning would seem to be a reasonable action to most anglers. Reducing the biomass of striped bass is important to the ecosystem as the salmon conservation community fears that the large striped bass population is having a serious impact on salmon stocks by preying on salmon smolts during the May and June migration to the ocean. DFO should open a retention recreational fishery in 2013 for striped bass on the Miramichi. This will increase angling opportunities and promote sport fishing. Maintaining the moratorium is hurting our salmon population and sure enough, COSEWIC is now recommending that our salmon stocks in the Gulf of St. Lawrence be placed on the Endangered Species List!