

Catch-and-release only part of solution

EDITORIAL Telegraph-Journal

April 13, 2015

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Federal Fisheries Minister Gail Shea has taken the first step toward saving the wild Atlantic salmon from extinction. But government must quickly expand the scope of its conservation efforts to bring salmon stocks back from the brink on New Brunswick's rivers.

Our province has enjoyed an enviable reputation as one of the world's best salmon fishing jurisdictions for more than a century. The Miramichi and Restigouche are two of the most well-known salmon rivers in North America. But stocks have fallen drastically in the last two decades. The Miramichi averaged 82,000 fish per year in the 1980s but last year the count was only 12,000.

Minister Shea formed a ministerial advisory committee on Atlantic Salmon in response to calls for action by the Atlantic Salmon Federation, Miramichi Salmon Association and other lobby groups. The introduction of mandatory hook-and-release on all Maritime rivers in the recreational fishery is a logical first step – and one we can control within our boundaries. So too is increasing the catch in the striped bass sport fishery since bass are known to be a predatory threat to salmon smolt. We understand the concerns expressed by Eel Ground First Nation Chief George Ginnish that his people rely on salmon for food, but the aboriginal practice of gill netting fish can't be sustained with today's dwindling stocks.

It is what is happening outside Canadian jurisdiction that should have the minister most worried. Large commercial salmon fisheries off the coast of Greenland and St. Pierre and Miquelon result in an annual harvest of 100,000 tonnes. Many of the small salmon smolts that leave our river systems each year never make it back because they are caught by these large commercial harvesters.

Gaining international co-operation in the goal to save the Atlantic salmon is part of the ministerial advisory committee's mandate. We urge Minister Shea and her federal counterparts to gain the co-operation of officials from Greenland, France and other countries involved in the commercial fisheries. An action plan to cull more of the grey seal herd, which also preys on returning salmon in the north Atlantic, should also be considered.

Saving the Atlantic salmon will take a concerted effort involving recreational fishermen, First Nation fisheries and the international community. We should not expect this first step on hook-and-release to solve the problem. It is an attempt to address the symptoms of the decline in stocks, but the real cause of the salmon's demise remains an elusive catch.