

Catch and release regulation a good first step in dealing with salmon crisis

STAFF Miramichi Leader

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Desperate times often call for desperate measures and the imposing a ban on killing any Atlantic Salmon this season should certainly serve as a reminder that everyone has a role to play in helping preserve the species for future generations. Something is happening to the salmon and it seems to be getting worse.

Where there were over 82,000 returning salmon counted within the Miramichi River watershed 20 years ago, that number dropped to just 12,000 last year. Against that backdrop, Fisheries and Oceans Canada's decision to mandate catch and release for the upcoming season is a logical step to help ensure that as many salmon as possible are given a fighting chance to spawn.

Hopefully, this regionally-imposed stay of execution for this vital species will be enough of a reprieve to allow researchers to figure out what is really going on here and for the government to act accordingly.

Nobody is blaming the steep drop in salmon stocks on the recreational angler and hopefully this decision doesn't slow down an industry that is extremely important to this region, valued at around \$20 million annually, when the run comes in later this spring. Most, we hope, fish because of the pure enjoyment they get from being out on the water and tangling with the King of Sport Fish and not exclusively for the meal later that day. The initial reaction to Minister Gail Shea's announcement on April 7 has been encouraging.

Everybody, from conservation organizations to everyday anglers to outfitters have been overwhelmingly supportive of these measures.

Most anybody who is even remotely familiar with the way things have been trending for the salmon lately can certainly recognize that we are now at a point where killing even one more wild salmon with conditions as they are would be one too many.

As Debbie Norton, the owner of the Upper Oxbow Outdoor Adventure Lodge pointed out in a story with the Miramichi Leader that can be read in today's paper, the government's decision to

impose a blanket catch and release policy throughout New Brunswick and Nova Scotia is a good first step. But that's really all this is - just a first step in what will likely be a long, arduous and ultimately complex process.

The cause, or more likely, causes, of these plummeting salmon numbers is still unknown. Is it the striped bass preying on baby salmon, as some have pointed to? Are migrating salmon being swallowed up by seals, as others have suggested? If the upswing in commercial salmon harvesting in Greenland to blame or is it some combination of all of the above?

That is all unclear at this point and until such a time comes when researchers are able to verify the cause and act accordingly, we feel the recreational fishery should remain limited to catch and release for the good of the species.

It is heartening to note that, right now, there is a collection of very intelligent people working toward a solution.

The advisory committee struck by Minister Shea late last year, which includes representation from all four Atlantic provinces and Quebec, will hopefully be able to provide the federal department with some tangible findings and an action plan once they have wrapped up their work.

In the meantime, it is still possible to enjoy our river system and the thrill of hooking a salmon without impacting the population. Many people undoubtedly already do. And barring a miraculous turnaround, it's up to every single stakeholder to do their part to prevent an already dire situation from getting even worse.

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