

First Nation wants trade-off for salmon netting

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Fisheries and Oceans Minister Gail Shea is in Miramichi on Thursday Dec. 18 to announce funding for Atlantic salmon conservation.
Photo: Miramichi Leader archive

A First Nation chief says his people will not give up gill-netting salmon on the Miramichi River until Ottawa offers compensation that will help them feed their families and make a modest living.

Ottawa banned anglers from keeping their Atlantic salmon catch this season, but the rules do not apply to First Nations.

Some aboriginal fishermen use gill-netting, a large wall of netting that kills or debilitates any creature that gets caught in it – including mature, egg-rich female salmon that would have otherwise spawned and helped preserve the threatened species.

Chief George Ginnish told the Telegraph-Journal on Thursday that Eel Ground First Nation would be willing to catch bass or lobster instead of salmon if the federal fisheries minister would come to the table and make an offer.

"Conservation is absolutely important and we want salmon to be there for the future generations, but we also have the issue of poverty," Ginnish said. "There's a surplus of other resources, and in terms of fairness and social justice, you have to provide other opportunities for our people. We're not looking for money, but food on the table."

Sport fishermen and First Nations are deeply worried about plummeting salmon returns, which last year reached historic lows. In 2014, only 12,000 returned to the Miramichi, the most important salmon river in the region. That compares to 82,000 two decades ago.

The crisis prompted federal Fisheries Minister Gail Shea to order only catch-and-release fishing this year for all Atlantic salmon.

However, it's difficult to say whether Shea will agree to negotiate with First Nations over giving up gill-netting.

"Minister Shea and Chief Ginnish will be meeting in the coming days to discuss a range of fisheries-related issues," Sophie Doucet, the minister's spokeswoman, said in an email Thursday. "We will continue to work closely with First Nations and anglers to ensure that fishing is done in as sustainable and selective a way as possible."

Ginnish and salmon conservation groups recently met in Moncton with the minister's salmon advisory committee, which led to Tuesday's announcement on catch and release.

The groups, which include the Atlantic Salmon Federation, the Miramichi Salmon Association, the New Brunswick Salmon Council and the Nova Scotia Salmon Association, have all pushed for an end to gill-netting.

"To promote conservation, there should be very selective fishing for First Nations on the northwest branch of the river and live release for the recreational fishery," said Sue Scott of the Atlantic Salmon Federation in Saint Andrews.

To cut down on salmon kills, the conservation groups are promoting the idea of First Nations using trap nets, a smaller, boxlike contraption that would allow them to release mature females and only keep the grilse, the younger salmon that have spent one winter at sea.

Metepenagiag or Red Bank First Nation, a Mi'kmaq community of about 600 people on the Miramichi, agreed to use trap nets last year until post-tropical storm Arthur destroyed the devices in July. They temporarily reverted to gill-netting before they could fix the traps.

"The anglers have to remember that the First Nations have first rights and it's their livelihoods as well," said Mark Hambrook, president of the Miramichi Salmon Association. "They're just as concerned about the lack of salmon that are coming back as we all are, even more so."

Hambrook said First Nations fishermen he's talked to caught barely any salmon last year. Most years, between Red Bank and Eel Ground, they might net between 300 and 400 large salmon and 1,500 to 2,000 grilse. The conservation groups say it's the large salmon that should be returned to the river.

By contrast, recreational anglers caught and killed an estimated 3,900 salmon in 2013, the last year for which statistics are available.

Overall in Atlantic Canada and Quebec, First Nations caught 58.6 tonnes of salmon in 2013. However, this statistic includes very productive rivers in Labrador.

Ginnish of Eel Ground said his Mi'kmaq community of about 980 people on the Miramichi River is catching fewer and fewer fish.

"We need access to other food," the chief said. "I don't know the exact number, but last year we might have had 500 fish to distribute. We have 200 homes, so that's only a little over two fish per household. That's not a fantastic amount of food, but if we were able to access lobster and bass, that would give folks more opportunity and let them put a little more in their freezers, so that it would last awhile."

Both lobster and striped bass are flourishing in the region.

Ginnish cited the Donald Marshall Jr. case, when the Supreme Court of Canada decided 14 years ago First Nations have a right to fish in their traditional territory, as long as it's to help feed themselves and make a moderate living. Marshall, a Mi'kmaq man in Nova Scotia, had been charged for catching and selling eels without a permit.

"Most people I think would agree the salmon decline has been caused by factors outside of our river system, but we don't want to hurt the salmon either," Ginnish said. "Our community is definitely willing to work with the federal government to come up with reasonable alternatives. But right now we're waiting to have that sit-down and discussion."

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