

It's catch and release only this season for salmon fishing on the Miramichi: DFO

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With the population of striped bass such as these exploding in the Miramichi River system, the federal Department of Fisheries and Oceans is consulting with river groups and sportsfishing organizations on whether to open a season for fishing the powerful stripers.

This year's salmon fishing season will be catch and release only on the Miramichi River and throughout the Gulf of St. Lawrence region in the rest of the province and in Nova Scotia.

The ban on retention, announced in a news release on Tuesday, is one of the first series of recommendations from the ministerial advisory committee for Atlantic salmon established in late February by Fisheries and Oceans Canada Minister Gail Shea.

The Miramichi River already had portions of the river completely closed last summer to fishing or had bans on retention all together as salmon conservancy groups have been reporting low salmon returns over the last number of years.

Mark Hambrook, president of the Miramichi Salmon Association, welcomed Tuesday's news, saying his organization had advised such a change.

He said he was pleased to hear the catch and release regulation will be in effect in plenty of time for the salmon fishing season that officially opens April 15.

The spring season runs from April 15 to May 15 and the summer season goes from May 16 until September or October, depending on the river system.

"Some rivers close the end of September some close Oct. 15, there are different closure dates," said Hambrook.

From a conservancy point of view, he said he welcomes the ban on retention but knows not everyone will share his viewpoint. However, he indicated the debate becomes irrelevant if the salmon completely disappear from the river system.

"Some fishermen won't buy a licence if they can't keep the fish and there are others who will hook and release but the bottom line is, if there's no fish out there to harvest it won't matter," said Hambrook. "Now, if lots of fish come in this year we suggested that DFO open it up if lots of fish are coming back, but if there aren't enough there you can't kill the last fish that are there,"

Anglers used to be able to catch and retain up to eight salmon grilse, but that number was lowered to four last year. DFO also lowered the daily retention limit for adult salmon to one from two in the Restigouche area last year.

As noted in Tuesday's DFO release, the Miramichi and the Restigouche rivers have had record-low counts in 2012 and 2013, following high returns in 2010 and 2011.

"In Eastern Canada, total abundance of Atlantic salmon at sea prior to marine exploitation was as high as 1.7 million fish in the mid-1970s, but is presently about 600,000 fish, a decline of 69 per cent over 42 years," said the release.

In Miramichi, salmon numbers have declined from 82,000 annually in the 1990s to 23,000 a year since 2011.

"These new conservation measures are also supported by key stakeholders, including the Atlantic Salmon Federation, the New Brunswick Salmon Council, the Nova Scotia Salmon Association and the Miramichi Salmon Association, who petitioned the Department for a one-year moratorium on the issuance of tags," read the release.

Other changes announced as per the advisor committee's recommendations are that anglers will be required to use artificial flies with a single barbless hook during the salmon angling season.

There are many factors being looked at as the causes for the decline in salmon runs, ranging from habitat degradation to aquaculture to over-harvesting, as well as a ramp-up of the commercial salmon fishery in Greenland.

The committee will be releasing a final report of recommendations at the end of the consultation period, which Hambrook said will be in June.

The department also announced they would open up the 2015 and 2016 striped bass fishing season in the Maritime provinces adjacent to the Southern Gulf of St. Lawrence

The minister announced the striped bass recreational fishery will take place from May 11 to 31, from Aug. 1 to 23, from Sept. 24 to 30, and from Oct. 24 to 31, 2015, anglers can retain one striped bass per day.

The bass can be caught and released throughout the season but anglers will be prohibited from possessing more than one striped bass at any given time.

As for gear restrictions, only single non-offset barbless circle hooks will be permitted.

"This type of hook decreases the chances of mortality when a fish is returned to the water, especially important during catch and release periods," read the release.

For those fishing in tidal waters of the Miramichi waters there are additional gear restrictions.

Additionally, to retain the fish bass must be between 50 and 65 centimetres long.

"We are pleased to increase significantly the retention and the catch and release fishery for the Southern Gulf of St. Lawrence striped bass," said Shea in the release. "We have heard the concerns expressed by stakeholders and remain committed to finding the right balance between increased fishing opportunities, ensuring the sustainability of this species as well as balanced ecosystems."

However, one man who is still concerned is Jim Laws, who said that he doesn't believe just the extra week and a half, allowed this year for a recreational fishery will make much of a difference in terms of cutting back on the rapidly expanding bass population.

Striped bass are known to eat young salmon.

This year will see the season will be open up or a total of 58 days, ten more days than last year.

In 2000, Fisheries and Oceans placed a fishing moratorium on all striped bass harvesting in 2000 when numbers were thought to be around 2,000.

According to 2013's Fisheries and Oceans numbers, the striped bass have a population around 250,000.

In a previous story with the Miramichi Leader, Hambrook said the Miramichi Salmon Association believes the bass population should be around 50,000 to 60,000.

"They are still protecting the bass and the bass is the biggest part of the problem... That won't help the salmon fishery at all," said Laws on Tuesday, who said he believes there should be commercial fishing allowed for striped bass.

Laws, a fishing advocate, organized last year's public meeting in Miramichi between anglers and members of DFO, where they put pressure on the federal department to have the bass season completely open for retention, without size limits on the fish.

He said the latest changes don't go far enough, and even questioned the accuracy of DFO's numbers.

"Fisheries and Oceans only recognized one spawning ground in the southern gulf region in the Northwest Miramichi and they would not allow research to happen to prove the bass is in Kouchibouguac and Richibucto. If they had, their numbers would be different."

Added Laws: "If we're going to save the Miramichi in any near time, we need a commercial fishery for striped bass. Recreational fishermen will not make an impact on the bass numbers."

He stressed the importance of salmon fishing on Miramichi's local economy.

The salmon fishery is estimated to be worth about \$20-million in Miramichi and supports more than 600 full-time jobs, mostly in rural area.

Laws said he will be looking into organizing another meeting and hopes that this year Minister Shea will be able to attend to listen firsthand to the concerns he and other anglers have about striped bass eating Atlantic salmon.

Fisheries and Oceans Canada will be completing a three-year striped bass diet and tagging study in 2016 and the release said the department anticipates that will then be able to provide "a clearer picture of the interactions between striped bass and salmon." This year the study sampling will cover different river systems throughout the Gulf of St. Lawrence.

Following each striped bass fishing outing, anglers are encouraged to fill out a striped bass survey found online at <http://www.glf.dfo-mpo.gc.ca/Gulf/FAM/Recreational-Fisheries/Creel-Census>

The public is also encouraged to report any illegal activity by calling toll-free 1-800-222-8477.

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