

Miramichi-area salmon numbers are encouraging

SAMANTHA MAGEE Miramichi Leader

June 17, 2015

Share this article

Facebook

Twitter

Email



The president of the Miramichi Salmon Association said it looks as though this year's Atlantic salmon population numbers may be higher than 2014, when they were found to be startlingly low.

Photo: Miramichi Leader archive

The president of the Miramichi Salmon Association says this year's summer salmon run is looking like it may be a little better than last year's start.

Mark Hambrook said while it was still a little too early to tell for sure, things were looking encouraging.

"So far, it's starting off a little better than last year, no great numbers yet but by the first of July we will know whether things are going good or not," said Hambrook. "We are pretty anxious here waiting to see what will happen."

The historically low numbers of Atlantic salmon prompted Fisheries and Oceans Canada to impose a ban on retention this year for the Miramichi River and throughout the Gulf of St. Lawrence region in the rest of the province and in Nova Scotia.

Last year the Miramichi River saw approximately 10,000 adult salmon return and 7,500 grilse, numbers which are startlingly low.

As noted in April's news release from Oceans Canada, 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.

Earlier this month, the Miramichi Salmon Association reported five bright salmon caught on the Southwest portion of the Miramichi River and that DFO had caught at least one in both the Cassilis and Millerton traps. There were also reports of several Gaspereau fishermen catching salmon grilse in their nets, which is what Hambrook said he finds encouraging.

There are many factors which must be considered when looking at the struggling salmon population such as: striped bass, warm water, commercial fishing and seals.

Hambrook said he thinks Grey Seals are actually a much bigger problem than initially thought.

"The problems for Atlantic salmon are originating, not in the rivers but on their ocean migration," said Hambrook. "No question, salmon smolts are being eaten by striped bass, that's a given. However, the Restigouche and Gaspereau rivers have had poor salmon returns last year and they don't have that striped bass issue."

The common denominator may be the growing seal population, which predate on the salmon.

The seal population is estimated to have increased from approximately 10,000 animals in 1960 to about 330,000-410,000 animals in 2010, according to a report done in March 2011 by Fisheries and Oceans Canada.

Those numbers reflect Eastern Canada as a whole and Hambrook said in the Gulf of St. Lawrence alone, there are likely about 100,000.

The seal seem to favour cod and stocks have plummeted as their numbers have gone up, according to the same report. Cod stocks have shown declines of at least 80 per cent, prompting a fishery closure in 1993 and despite that stocks remain low today.

Hambrook is worried the marine mammals might do the same to the salmon.

"They like to eat salmon too so it's not so hard to deduce that.... So you have 17,500 fish (returning to Miramichi) and at least 4,000 seals just in Miramichi Bay, so I think the odds are in favour of the seals, DFO has done surveys in planes recently and they have counted just 2,000 on the beaches."

He said while seals may not be the main problem, he is just looking at the numbers.

"There's something out there, I don't know what it is, all I'm saying is look at what has changed. So we see striped bass having some impact here, which isn't affecting salmon on the decline in other rivers but what's common to all is the grey seal."

There is a push now to get a Grey Seal hunt in New Brunswick, similar to Newfoundland and Labrador, which the MSA would support.

"It has to be a sustainable harvest. In the senate report, it called for a cull of grey seals but you can't do that, if you go out and just start slaughtering animals, we won't be able to sell our seafood products anywhere else in the world. It's just not acceptable."

Recently, the North Atlantic Salmon Conservation Organization held a fishing conference and discussed the overfishing of Atlantic salmon in Greenland.

"Their domestic consumption is supposed to be 20 tonnes of fish and last year they harvested 58 tonnes just for their own use," said Hambrook, who said although the mandate of the Miramichi Salmon Association was to focus on local issues, he said that was having a direct impact here at home.

Greenland has set a 45-tonne quota, garnering condemnation from multiple conservation groups and politicians.

In addition to preserving an iconic Canadian species, Atlantic salmon angling is a highly lucrative business in Miramichi.

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.

Hambrook said the number of people coming to fish in Miramichi this summer will likely be down but that he believes it's not so much because of the fact that it's catch and release only but because people know that the population numbers are low.

"People are saying, 'I heard the salmon population is not very good, so I'm not going to bother.' So there's pessimism around salmon fishing right now and we've heard outfitters say that business is down but it could change just like that but preliminary bookings are down."

Registration for the 10th annual Salmon Classic are also down this year, he said.

The fundraiser for the Miramichi Salmon Association promotes conservation, as all the salmon that are caught are released back into the Miramichi River, not just because this year is catch and release only but because the event has always done it that way.

Hambrook said registration is currently only at about half of what it was last year.

Share this article

Facebook

Twitter

Email