

More studies needed on link between striped bass, salmon: Miramichi Salmon Association president

SHANNON MACLEOD | Miramichi Leader

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The president of the Miramichi Salmon Association says he's optimistic for better numbers of salmon returns from 2015.

Photo: Miramichi Leader archive

While the final numbers for 2015 haven't been released, the president of the Miramichi Salmon Association said he's optimistic things have improved.

Mark Hambrook said the number of salmon returns has been gradually declining. Some years have been better than others, but essentially, it's not getting any better.

"We think that there's hope. We saw decent returns of adult salmon this past year in other rivers," he said. "The Miramichi is lagging behind and I think we have some issues that are unique to our river."

Hambrook said it's time the federal government takes firm action on a wide range of fronts. "We don't feel that there will be a whole lot of fish coming back until there's some fundamental changes."

Hambrook said one of the key issues that needs to be addressed is the striped bass population.

"We need the research to be done to find out if they are hurting the salmon numbers," Hambrook said. "We have circumstantial evidence that the striped bass are affecting the salmon, but we need concrete evidence."

The rapidly declining salmon counts being recorded along the Miramichi have coincided with the sharp rise in the bass population. Miramichi River salmon counts have plummeted from 82,000 roughly 20 years ago to just 12,000 last year. Meanwhile, roughly 255,000 striped bass spawners were recorded on the Northwest Miramichi in 2014, the highest estimated totals since monitoring began back in 1993, where the numbers ranged from only 3,000 to 5,000.

Another issue is young salmon are leaving the Miramichi River and not returning. He said research needs to be done to see what's preventing the salmon from returning, whether it's grey seals, striped bass, foreign fisheries, other fisheries – whatever the case may be.

"We have a lack of protection, and in a lot of areas, we need habitat work done," he said.

The Department of Fisheries and Oceans Canada hasn't yet released the final numbers for 2015.

"They tell us it won't be available until the end of February, so we don't know what the actual numbers were in 2015," he said.

In 2014, the Miramichi River saw approximately 10,000 adult salmon return and 7,500 grilse.

"But we do know that last year (2014) was better than the previous couple years," Hambrook said.

Hambrook said the Nepisiguit River, near Bathurst, for example, had a better run than they have in a long time.

"Only 28 per cent of the smolts that we put transmitters on made it out of the Miramichi Bay. Compared to the Restigouche, out of the Bay de Chaleur, they had 60 per cent," he said. "Going out of the Chaleur Bay is a lot greater distance than coming out of Miramichi Bay."

The historically low numbers of Atlantic salmon prompted Department of Fisheries and Oceans to impose a ban on keeping any salmon in 2015 for the Miramichi River and throughout the Gulf of St. Lawrence region in the rest of the province and in Nova Scotia.

Hambrook said by not having a retention period for salmon, the industry suffered.

"Some tackle shops suffered and so on, but by the way, if there's no fish, everyone's going to suffer," he said. "They're going to be out of business. You've got to have enough fish first, then businesses can build on that."

However, Hambrook said catch and release did not affect a lot bookings in the area last year.

“What did affect it was the prospect of poor salmon returns. We had two years of poor salmon returns, even if there had been a full retention, I think the bookings would have been down somewhat because people thought there weren’t many fish there.”

The catch and release only affected New Brunswick anglers, Hambrook said.

“A lot of New Brunswick residents like to keep the fish, most tourists don’t bother. New Brunswickers like to keep the fish, so therefore didn’t buy a licence,” he said. “That meant they weren’t in the tackle shops, buying their flies, waders and all the things that keep the tackle shops going.”

In the meantime, while the tackle shops may have suffered for a lack of salmon anglers, 2015 saw a handful of retention periods open for striped bass.

In 2004, the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada classified the species as threatened due to population reductions in the 1990s. Since 2012, however, the Department of Fisheries and Oceans has reclassified the fish into a lower bracket when it became clear that bass populations were on the rise.

“There’s a lot of people who really enjoy fishing for bass, but the point is, does that mean the choice has to be bass or salmon?” Hambrook said. “I hope it’s not. I’m hoping that we can have both, but we certainly would like to see a larger retention of striped bass.”

Without the final numbers, Hambrook said it’s difficult to gauge what the Department of Fisheries and Oceans will do for 2016, if there will be a retention period or not. Hambrook said there’s a lot of pressure for Fisheries and Oceans Canada to open at least a limited number of salmon to be kept.

“I was told they’re going to have some consultation in January with all the groups to get their feelings, without any of us knowing what the final numbers are,” he said. “When they get the final numbers they’ll make their decision.”

That decision, Hambrook said, will be whether anglers will be able to retain their catches, or if it’ll be catch and release again.

The New Brunswick Wildlife Federation says sales of salmon licences dropped to 9,238 in 2015 from 16,486 in 2014. Selling fishing licences is a provincial responsibility through the Department of Natural Resources.

“One of the problems has been, when you buy a salmon-fishing licence, there’s a report card that you’re supposed to fill out at the end of the season and mail in,” Hambrook said.

Once filled out, the report card tells the provincial government where fish were caught, how many fish were caught, how many were released, their length and weight.

“In New Brunswick, only two per cent of anglers fill that information out. Now in Nova Scotia it’s mandatory,” he said. “You have to fill that out or you can’t get a licence the next year.”

Those numbers might be better recorded this year, however, because Hambrook said for the first time, licences will be electronic.

“You can put your email and all your information in, so now they have a way of contacting people. So what we’re hoping is they’ll come up with better statistics in the future.”

For now, Hambrook said the Miramichi Salmon Association is looking at a host of programs to address some of the issues.

“We’re looking at how we can put more fish in the river,” he said. “We want to do more work on studying the relationship between striped bass and the Atlantic salmon.”

He said between the MSA and Atlantic Salmon Federation, a lot of money is being spent looking at that relationship.

“We’re also going to do the same thing we’ve always done and that’s to monitor the populations, monitor the juveniles and smolts that are heading out to the ocean,” he said. “We’re tracking adults out in the ocean, we’re tracking young salmon so we want to keep these programs going.”

Their goals, essentially, are to get more fish in the river and find out what’s happening to fish and why they aren’t coming back.

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