

# Balance needed when it comes to Miramichi salmon issue

Miramichi Leader

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As the Miramichi region anxiously awaits Fisheries and Oceans Canada's management plan for the upcoming Atlantic salmon fishing season, ideally what we will see is the department coming back with a more targeted approach than the unprecedented blanket measures that were imposed last summer.

For as long as people have been fishing the King of Sport Fish on the Miramichi River and its tributaries, they have typically been able to take one home at the end of the day. With a little luck, of course. That all changed in 2015 when the federal government rolled out a wall-to-wall catch-and-release policy that barred anyone from catching and killing a wild salmon.

The new rules were a direct response to the record low numbers of returning salmon that were counted at monitoring stations on both branches of the Miramichi. The damage was noticeably worse on the Northwest in 2014 but the Southwest fork failed to meet its spawning requirements either. Making matters worse, nobody - not biologists, conservationists, anglers, or anybody else had any clear indication about what caused such a steep decline. There are theories, of course, but still nothing conclusive. Is this a full-blown crisis or, as many local fishermen have suggested, was it just a down year?

With that in mind, we sincerely hope that Fisheries and Oceans Canada has, over the last several months, taken a long look at a report that was presented to it by the special advisory committee struck by former Tory minister Gail Shea in response to the situation.

There were over 61 recommendations in there and most of them make a lot of sense. Among the main ones was a call for Ottawa to free up additional resources in order to better research what has been happening to the salmon during their annual migration. The role of the commercial fishery in Greenland, the traditional aboriginal harvest and the use of gill nets and the impact of natural predators like seals and striped bass all warrant a much closer examination. The salmon counts for last summer, thankfully, were quite a bit better than the year before and can hopefully be taken as a sign that things are beginning to turn around.

But, for now, we feel it's still too soon to celebrate a triumphant return. There are still far too many unknowns to rationalize lifting all of the restrictions on the fishery heading into 2016. Having said that, we agree with what the ministerial committee and many others have suggested, which are rules determined on a case-by-case, river-by-river basis. Specifically, setting individual conservation requirements for each system and establishing a management plan depending on the level of need.

New Liberal Fisheries Minister Hunter Tootoo has said that whatever the government comes back with would be "guided by facts and by science." Hopefully, the government will have enough of both to allow for more activity on the water this summer after the province witnessed nearly a 40 per cent drop in salmon licenses last

year. It is a delicate balance in trying to protect an invaluable resource that means so much to the cultural identity of the Miramichi region while also being mindful of an economic impact measured at around \$20 million to this region alone every year. Hopefully, in terms of setting policy, the government will opt to test the waters a bit more in 2016 without having to dive in head first.

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