

Miramichiers' opinions being squeezed out of salmon conversation: Upper Miramichi mayor

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A large salmon is released back into the wild.

Photo: ATLANTIC SALMON FEDERATION

As New Brunswick anglers await word about whether they can catch and keep a salmon this season, the mayor of a community that relies heavily on the salmon industry every year says he feels the local population has been squeezed out of the conversation.

Upper Miramichi Mayor Doug Munn represents a swath of the province that is steeped in salmon lore.

Generations of families have fished the cool waters of the salmon-rich Southwest Miramichi River and its tributaries and as long as people have been wetting a line they have been able to bring home a fish at the end of the day.

It's a tradition that has become deeply ingrained in the culture of the Miramichi River Valley, Munn said, and that ability to fish the river for sustenance is something that people from outside the region might not understand.

So when Fisheries and Oceans Canada, in response to alarmingly low fish counts, last year took the unprecedented step of restricting all salmon fishing activities within the Miramichi River watershed to catch-and-release, Munn said residents were understandably a little put off.

What's more, he said that any ensuing discussion about where the process goes from here and how the fishery should be managed heading into 2016 and beyond hasn't featured much in the way of input from the people who know the river best.

"All of these governments all say they're going to be transparent but I've been on council down here for eight years and I've never seen them darken our doorstep about any of this," Munn said on Wednesday. "I know the Atlantic Salmon Federation and the Miramichi Salmon Association are totally against us keeping fish, but then again, 90 per cent of those people don't live on the Miramichi - yet they have more say than we do, and that's not right."

Both organizations – which invest heavily in measures such as salmon conservation, protection and restoration – favour Ottawa maintaining strict, science-based regulations on the fishery for another season.

While the counts recorded at monitoring stations last summer were noticeably higher than the record lows witnessed back in 2014, both organizations are calling for the government to exercise caution.

Officials with the Atlantic Salmon Federation further articulated their stance after sharing a copy of their response to an opinion survey put out by Fisheries and Oceans in February, aimed at gathering input prior to releasing the rules for next season. In it, the federation says that they're still extremely concerned about a clear pattern of a reduced amount of returning Miramichi salmon that has been ongoing for a number of years.

One decent year, it says, isn't enough to convince them that the mystery has been solved.

"The Miramichi system, which historically had the largest known runs of Atlantic salmon in Canada, had average returns of around 100,000 per year from 1985-1995 - that dropped to an average of about 50,000 per year from 1996 to 2011, and to about 21,000 per year from 2012 to 2014, reaching a low of around 17,800 in 2014," the ASF noted in its survey response.

"Despite some signs of improvement in 2015 compared to the low year of 2014, populations throughout the region remain at low levels of abundance compared to 20 years ago."

There have been a number of theories put out there about why this is happening, although none have been completely quantified.

People with opinions on the situation have pointed to the impact of an increase in commercial salmon harvesting in Greenland, growth in the population of grey seals, an explosion of striped bass near the mouth of

the Miramichi River, the use of gill nets by traditional First Nations fishermen as having an adverse impact on the number of salmon that make it upriver to spawn.

An advisory committee that was struck by former Conservative minister Gail Shea came back with 61 recommendations for the government's consideration last summer.

Among the main ones, it suggested that the government looks at determining its regulations on a case-by-case basis depending on the health of a given river system. It has also suggested opening up additional resources for habitat renewal and further research into the impact of predation.

"As anglers, we have a responsibility to ensure that our fishing activity is not further stressing the resource," ASF president Bill Taylor, who served on the advisory committee, said in a recent commentary. "We need effective science-based, precautionary management that ensures the long-term health of individual Atlantic salmon populations and the recreational fisheries that they support, for the benefit of all New Brunswickers for generations to come."

Munn said that while residents in the river valley feel that both the ASF and the MSA have done a lot of good work over a lot of years, they don't see eye-to-eye on a few issues.

By continuing to restrict a person's ability to hook a grilse, which is a young salmon, and put it on the dinner table that night is an attack on a long-established way of life that Miramichiers take seriously, he said.

"How do they expect rural New Brunswickers, especially on the Miramichi, to live here and survive if you can't live off the land? That's our way of life," Munn said.

In terms of the larger industry that is worth around \$20 million to the rural economy in this part of the province and supports hundreds of jobs, Munn said that it was "dead" last season.

In speaking with some of his local outfitters last year, he said they noticed a sharp drop in business. Many of them, he said, were initially supportive of the hook-and-release measures but after they saw the impact on their bottom line, he said some of them have changed their stance.

Meanwhile, he said that many local anglers opted to keep their rods and tackle boxes at home, something that would seem to align with a 38 per cent drop in the sale of fishing licenses in 2015.

"I was brought up on the river, I lived at Norrad's Bridge my whole life in Bloomfield, and any other summer or spring, you could go out there and people lined both sides of the river fishing," Munn said. "Last year, you could go by there for a week and not see a soul - so there's definitely money that's not coming to our town."

Slightly downriver in Doaktown, meanwhile, a place that bills itself as the heart of the Miramichi salmon fishing universe, the mayor there is opting for a more diplomatic approach.

Bev Gaston also knows the river well and says he sees both sides of the issue. While the industry is clearly vital to the survival of small communities like Doaktown, Gaston said he is also concerned about some of the wider trends on a conservation level.

"We definitely have to protect the resource, first and foremost," Gaston said. "A lot of the guys who come here to fish aren't keeping a salmon anyway."

Gaston said he would be interested in seeing Fisheries and Oceans consider removing the blanket restrictions this season in favour of a more targeted approach that closes off particular areas of concern.

The spring salmon season gets underway in mid-April.

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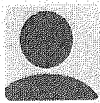


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