

**Address by Jerry Doak to the
Parliamentary Standing Committee on Fisheries and Oceans
May 17, 2016**

I wish to thank the members of the committee and in particular, my MP Pat Finnigan, for the invitation to appear before you today. I am not speaking to you on behalf of any organization but rather on behalf of the people of the Miramichi. We have previously been left out of discussions which have forced a massive change in our relationship with the river and we very much appreciate the opportunity to address this committee.

The Miramichi has been my family's home for 200 years, and my family's work for 70 years. I have personally depended on the health of the salmon resource for 39 years of my adult life and with my son now involved and his two sons toddling about, you can see why our family might take this issue quite seriously. As a child growing up in my father's tackle shop, I encountered people from all over North America who could go anywhere they wished, but they chose to come to my river. That gave me an early understanding of how important the Atlantic salmon is to the identity of the Miramichi valley and its people.

While I know the scope of your mandate is broad, I make no apology for the narrowness of my focus. I have been called "salmo-centric" and like the salmon itself, I am a product of my home waters and indelibly imprinted by the river of my birth.

The Miramichi is not well served by a management strategy which lumps all rivers together under a blanket policy. It both needs and deserves a more targeted approach tailored to its particular set of unique characteristics.

The Miramichi river system is comprised of 4 distinct rivers, all of which have their own estuary, and their own management challenges.

It sustains a comparatively healthy and diverse population of wild Atlantic salmon, which, like all creatures, are cyclical in nature.

It is not hatchery dependent in any sense of the word, despite attempts to make it otherwise.

It provides a thriving and challenging salmon fishery which is a source of employment for some, a source of enjoyment for many and, by times, a source of frustration for all.

It supports a highly developed angling infrastructure which plays a primary role as a strong incentive for wise management of a valuable resource.

It balances the interests of private riparian owners and their essential revenue stream with the local angler who has the river flowing through his bloodstream.

It remains a persistently healthy watershed, despite concerns about encroachment from the forest industry.

It's stellar reputation makes it a target for those who quickly exploit its name to amplify the shock value of any perceived downturn in salmon stocks.

The resilience of the Miramichi's salmon run makes it an attractive setting for those attempting to rescue or re-create a resource with some assurance of success.

It enjoys a healthy mix of both 1 sea winter grilse, 90% of which are male and multi sea winter salmon 85% of which are female.

It has an exemplary record of practical management and selective harvest which has only recently been disrupted.

Over the years, participation in the Miramichi salmon fishery has been based upon an overarching principle of mutual respect:

Respect for the value of the non resident fishery and for those whom it employs.

Respect for the reputation of the Miramichi which attracts visitors from around the world.

Respect for the salmon resource and its cultural and economic significance to all Miramichiers.

Respect for the rights of first nations to a sustainable harvest

Respect for fisheries regulations based upon sound science and practical considerations.

Respect by residents for private property rights which limit access to the most productive salmon pools through riparian ownership and lastly, respect by visitors and guests for the local resident fishery and its unique attachment to the salmon resource. It is the dramatic decline in this respect and consideration for the local fishery which is of greatest concern to me, not as a businessman nor as a fisherman, but as a Miramichier.

This decline began to surface in the mid 1990's as a direct result of a number of factors which I can outline later if you wish. It found its voice in a book published 20 years ago which quoted one prominent conservationist saying:

*There isn't room enough for everybody who wants to go salmon fishing.
And I don't know where you draw the dividing line
unless it's the people who can afford to pay their way."*

In our store, we gradually began to hear talk of the need to release grilse, coupled with references to local anglers as "meat men" or "fish killers". By 1998 a strategy of "peer pressure" began to invade the fishery and lines of division were clearly drawn.

Private lodges and clubs were encouraged and sometimes bullied into adopting "live release" of grilse under threat of censure if they failed to comply.

In 2002 the province introduced a "live release" license, even though people were already free to release their grilse by choice and bound to release their salmon by law.

In 2015, DFO finally bowed to this pressure and is now being urged to continue this "zero harvest" strategy indefinitely.

Perceived threats can often lead to the sacrifice of real liberties and when personal preference becomes public policy, thought is seldom given to the people whose lives are most affected.

Consider DFO's cavalier decision to ban the use of double hooks last year which lacked any scientific data to support the move. The cost to individual anglers was severe and to fly shops like mine who employ people all winter to produce flies for sale in the summer, it amounted to a \$17,000.00 uncompensated loss, literally overnight. Imagine our frustration when it was discovered after the season that a variation order was never written to enforce it.

In 2010 DFO introduced a mid season ban on grilse retention for the Northwest and Little Southwest Miramichi rivers. This was later expanded to a season wide restriction. In the six seasons since, no other measures have been taken to help those two rivers. No study has been conducted to show any benefit, nor has any been called for.

In 2015, DFO chose to extend this to the Main Southwest Miramichi. This has produced a dramatic exodus of local anglers from our river, and with them, an astute level of surveillance, participation and protection. This is only partially reflected in the 44% decline in resident salmon license sales, but more starkly visible in the empty pools where local people normally gather during the most productive weeks of the season.

Miramichiers know a thing or two about salmon and we are not easily fooled. Miramichiers know that our grilse don't go to Greenland but our large salmon do. We have been releasing large salmon for 32 years but with very little exemplary value. When a bully steals your lunch, the solution is not to stop taking your lunch.

We also know that salmon don't feed in fresh water, so their willingness to take a fly is not governed by appetite. As a result it is not uncommon to fish for several days without hooking a fish. Everyone agrees that angling is not the problem, but restricting it seems to be the only solution.

We know that angling interception rates are very low and the percentage of female grilse is even lower, all of which underlines the minimal impact of permitting a grilse retention fishery. The Miramichi has traditionally been able to support this fishery and there is no reason to assume that it cannot continue to do so.

We know that the estuary of the North West Miramichi is being used as a breeding ground for a rampant and voracious population of striped bass, effectively putting our smolts through a meat grinder before they even have time to face the challenges of the open ocean.

We know that DFO continues to squander a perfect opportunity to develop a First Nations commercial harvest of striped bass contingent upon the elimination of mono-filament gill nets and switching to the exclusive use of trap nets for grilse.

We know that every other threat, whether seals, striped bass, cormorants, merganzers, sea birds, Greenland, St. Pierre and Miquelon, Gaspereau nets or gill nets all appear to be untouchable. We have grown tired of being the only touchable, just as a dog grows tired of being kicked by a man trying to look tough.

We know that DFO has failed to provide accurate adult population assessments. Counting facilities are often affected by high water events and produce highly unreliable estimates of current stocks. It is a disgrace that the cost of new electronic counters must be underwritten by the private sector but their sizeable investment underlines how little confidence is placed in current stock assessment data.

We know that the desire to produce as many smolts as possible by over-saturation of the habitat carries with it a strong risk of diminishing returns. There is good reason to suspect that our poor smolt survival at sea may be related to increased juvenile densities at home.

We know that DFO fails to understand that a permissible harvest does not translate into an actual harvest. Unlike a commercial fishery, angling is based upon a voluntary response, and considerably less lethal in its method. Regardless of the number of tags issued, angler retention averages far less than one per license.

Finally, we know that DFO seems to operate on the assumption that anything natural is good and anything anthropogenic is bad. Forest fires are natural, but we still fight them. Diseases are natural but we still treat them. Man is a steward of nature, not an intruder. This stewardship requires wise use and hands on engagement, not distant worship.

Miramichiers lives are not enriched so much by monetary gain as by an attachment to nature that fastens us here, despite efforts to peel us away. To casually disrupt this connection is no small matter, and one which should only be taken with great care and sound science. We have seen little evidence of either one and on behalf of the people of the Miramichi, I would suggest that it's high time we did.