

Presentation to Ministerial Advisory Committee for Atlantic Salmon

By Nola Chiasson on March 24, 2015

David Wilson

MSA Chairman's Opening Statement to the

Ministerial Advisory Committee for Atlantic Salmon

My name is David Wilson and I'm the volunteer Chairman of the Miramichi Salmon Association. Our organization has been in existence for over 60 years and its mission is to preserve the Atlantic salmon on the Miramichi River in perpetuity. We have 2,000 members and supporters and a large volunteer Board of Directors from the USA and Canada and we employ a professional staff to conduct our conservation mission. We operate Canada's oldest salmon hatchery and have been actively involved in stock assessments with DFO, research with ASF and various universities, habitat work to remove spawning obstructions and to create cold water sanctuaries and continue to educate about the need to preserve the salmon species. Our members are deeply concerned about the number of adult returns of salmon to the Miramichi in the past 3 years and this was the reason why we and ASF called for this Advisory Committee last September. Many of the actions required to reverse this trend need the legislative power of the federal government to implement and we need action now.

I would now like to introduce our President, Mark Hambrook. Mark has been associated with salmon conservation during his career serving as a biologist with DFO for 18 years and for the last 18 years as the President and chief biologist of the Miramichi Salmon Association. In this capacity, he has the credentials to assess the issues facing salmon returns and he heads up our conservation team.

Mark Hambrook

MSA President's Address to the

Ministerial Advisory Committee for Atlantic Salmon

Over the vast region where Atlantic salmon exist in Canada, this Committee will hear about many problems that face the Atlantic salmon in freshwater and the marine environment. The problems with acid rain, siltation, dams and aquaculture operations near the mouths of salmon streams can all be serious problems, but the Miramichi River is facing the lowest returns of adult salmon ever and none of these issues are the primary cause. We have the second largest river in New Brunswick and for many years had the largest run of Atlantic salmon in North America. This is now under threat.

We have been told by DFO that the major problem facing our salmon population is marine survival, and I concur with this conclusion. Many groups are struggling to correct situations in their rivers and we also have some issues in the Miramichi that our Association is addressing, but even with a healthy river, the prospects of getting a healthy return is problematic for most of the salmon's range. It's true that in parts of Newfoundland and Labrador, spawning escapements are being exceeded so the marine problems there are not as acute as in the Southern Gulf of St. Lawrence. Without direct scientific evidence to pinpoint the cause for

increased mortality at sea, we must use some common sense. We know that salmon are being intercepted by man on their long journey in the ocean, but the numbers reported are nowhere near catches of the past and we have been told again by DFO that they don't suspect any major illegal harvest activity in the ocean.

So, it appears to be an issue of eat or be eaten.

The Grey seal population in the Southern Gulf of St. Lawrence has now grown to be over 100,000 animals from only a few thousand 50 years ago and the Senate Fisheries and Oceans Committee has recently recommended a seal cull to protect the threatened Atlantic cod population. During the summer months, many of these seals move into Miramichi Bay and other bays in the Southern Gulf where salmon must migrate through to get to their home rivers. The 2012 Senate Report called the Sustainable Management of Grey Seal Populations: A Path Toward Recovery of Cod and Other Groundfish Stocks, also recommended that the federal government promote seal derived products for a sustainable harvest and I'm pleased to report that one of the Miramichi First Nations, Eel Ground, has a proposal prepared that will address the sustainable principles identified in the Senate Report. This is not a quick fix and will take years to bring the seal population down even slightly, but it is an imbalance that needs to be addressed now.

Our recommendation: We would ask that this Committee recommend that DFO assist Eel Ground First Nation in developing a harvest and marketing strategy utilizing the whole carcass of grey seals greater than one year old.

The other common sense imbalance in the ecosystem that might be affecting the survival of salmon in the marine estuary of the Miramichi is the large striped bass population. Tagging studies lead by ASF using transmitters on salmon smolts have shown a decline in survival through the estuary of the Miramichi over the past decade that corresponds with the increase in striped bass populations. Mature striped bass return to the tidal portion of the Northwest Miramichi River to spawn in late May from all over the Southern Gulf of St. Lawrence and their numbers have grown from 2,000 adults to over 200,000 adults in the past 15 years.

Our recommendation: With spawning requirements at a little over 20,000 fish annually, we propose that DFO reduce the spawning population down to 50,000 adults to help balance the ecosystem. This can be easily and quickly accomplished by increasing the bag limit for recreational anglers and by permitting a small commercial harvest for First Nations.

The scientific evidence may not be conclusive that these are the major predators of Atlantic salmon, but again common sense tells us that these are populations that have grown beyond their recent historical levels and require large numbers of prey fish to sustain. Bringing the striped bass and grey seal populations down to balanced levels may reduce the pressure on Atlantic salmon smolts and adults and many other species of fish.

The interactions between grey seals and Atlantic salmon needs to be researched as well as striped bass and salmon. The ASF/MSA research program on tracking adult salmon in the ocean needs to be supported so more evidence can be obtained to determine the mortality zones for salmon. While we need the science to determine if these are the causes of the salmon's decline, it still makes sense to start these programs now as they will take years to have an effect.

Our recommendation: DFO needs to put financial and human resources into research on the causes of salmon mortality in the marine environment.

Because we are not getting enough adult salmon back to meet minimum spawning requirements, it is our view that we must take measures now to protect the ones that are returning. Simply put, we can't continue to harvest fish if spawning escapements are not being met or we won't have any salmon left.

Our recommendations:

We need to implement a harvest regime similar to Newfoundland with color coded rivers and colored tags so grilse harvest can be based upon abundance. Since this requires a change to the Maritimes Fisheries Regulations and will require one year to obtain legislation change, we are proposing a one year moratorium on grilse harvesting until this can be implemented in the Maritime Provinces.

We would request that DFO immediately implement the use of single pinched barb hooks to reduce catch and release mortality on rivers containing salmon, as is done in Newfoundland.

An education program must be implemented to inform anglers on how to properly release large salmon and grilse and the increased risk of mortality associated with 'playing' a fish too long. Although difficult to enforce, if catch and release mortality can't be reduced by education then a time limit on playing a fish may have to be legislated.

We must respect First Nation's right to harvest salmon once conservation requirements are met and First Nations should harvest only grilse and all large salmon should be released, since they are mostly female. The use of gill nets indiscriminately kills all fish that enters them and a one year moratorium on harvesting salmon and grilse should be implemented, with adequate compensation to First Nations, while they retool and establish trap net operations that permit the release of large salmon that get caught in them and the retention of grilse only.

We also need to reduce the interception of salmon and grilse in mixed stock fisheries destined for our rivers. West Greenland harvests our large multi-year salmon that are mostly females and St. Pierre and Miquelon harvests both large salmon and grilse.

Our recommendation: The Government of Canada needs to put international pressure on these countries to stop harvesting by taking the lead by banning the harvest of all large salmon in Canada.

Back in our river, there are a number of items that require action and most actions are collaborations of DFO and the private sector.

Our recommendations:

Explore the newest technologies for enumerating fish in rivers to obtain more reliable statistics on adult salmon returns, smolt migrations and striped bass spawners.

Historical data from all sources needs to be warehoused in a storage medium library that can be accessed by all. We also need more accurate counts of striped bass to manage that population at the 50,000 fish level.

The invasive small mouth bass must be eliminated in Miramichi Lake using any means possible.

Need to accelerate the program to direct cold water sources entering the river to create sanctuaries to protect adults and juveniles during warm water events.

Assist in a short term stocking strategy that could help provide more salmon in our river, especially the NW Miramichi, while the other strategies mentioned earlier make progress. This could be best done by capturing wild smolts and rearing them to the adult stage where they could be spawned and the resulting fry stocked in the river or by releasing the adult salmon in the river to spawn on their own.

All of these programs need monitoring, enforcement and use of the best science available. We have a more comprehensive plan developed that we would like to provide to the Committee for specific action items that are more detailed than can be mentioned in this short oral presentation.