

Reflections on the State of Salmon Stocks on the Miramichi

Mark Hambrook, retiring MSA President

Since this is my last article in the *Leaper* as President of the MSA, I would like to say that I have thoroughly enjoyed working with our Directors and members over the past 20 years and hope that our collective efforts have made a difference in maintaining our Atlantic salmon populations. In my view, salmon conservation is a war, not a battle, and wars can only be won when a nation puts all its resources into the fight. Unfortunately, this has not happened and the front-line troops are getting weary and disillusioned; we need a champion in government willing to mobilize the resources needed to get the job done.

Although the battles are many, each battle won is a step closer to victory - and 2021 is poised to be a pivotal year on the battlefields. One *major* enemy to Atlantic salmon population in the Miramichi is global warming, which creates disruptions in habitat and predator-prey relationships in our rivers and in the ocean. As a global community, we must address climate change to save the planet, but on the salmon battlefield, we must act locally to mitigate the effects of global warming so salmon can adapt and survive. I feel hopeful that if we win enough battles, eventually we will win the war. Here are some of the key battles ahead in 2021:

Habitat. It is a fact that the summers are getting warmer resulting in warm water temperatures and low flows that affect the Atlantic salmon. With our partnership with Anqotum Resource Management and the Atlantic Salmon Federation, two cold water sanctuary pools were enhanced this past year and more are planned over the next 4 years. Through better land use management, we can actually prevent water temperatures from increasing dramatically. Our forests are a valuable asset in N.B. as they sequester carbon and prevent solar radiation from reaching the ground. We need to stop converting forest land into blueberry fields near salmon streams and to increase the size of buffer zones along sensitive stretches of rivers. The MSA has proposed that the announced increase in Protected Natural Areas for New Brunswick be directed in the Miramichi region to increasing buffer zones along selected stretches of waterways that could heat up faster if the forest cover was removed based on the underlying geology. The decision on which areas get put into the Protected Natural Areas is expected in 2021 and could start to mitigate the effects of hot summers for fish populations, if buffer zones are chosen.

Invasive Species. As waters warm, habitats become more favourable for some invasive species and the battle on the Miramichi is trying to eradicate smallmouth bass from Miramichi Lake, and now, a section of the Southwest Miramichi River. Every year that this decision is delayed, the harder it will be to eradicate. The federal government must make a decision to allow the eradication to happen in 2021 or smallmouth bass will be in the Miramichi River **forever**. This is a legacy of conservation groups pushing to rid our waterways of an invasive species for 12 years with the enemy being government inaction and indifference.

Predator/prey interaction. We have watched the striped bass population in the Miramichi brought back from a few thousand spawners to over a million and watched the population crash back down to 300,000 spawners. During this time, the non-government groups have documented the collapse of the salmon smolt run going to the ocean from striped bass predation, yet harvest of bass was minimized in this grand experiment to see how many striped bass the Miramichi could accommodate at the expense of our Atlantic salmon. Regulations need to be made to be able to harvest more stripers by anglers and

commercial fishermen in 2021 to regain a balanced ecosystem. Atlantic salmon need to be able to leave our estuaries to actually get to the ocean to face the perils of grey seals that have decimated groundfish stocks in the Gulf of St. Lawrence, another issue that needs to be addressed.

By-Catch of Salmon. Atlantic salmon are being captured in other commercial fishing gear as they migrate into the Miramichi Bay and River. Most of these salmon are returned to the water, but once they mix with other commercial fish being dipped out of traps in large hoop nets, they lose most of their scales and die after they are released. This has been documented and could be mitigated by separating large fish from small fish as they swim in the traps using spacing bars or other technology. This is a needless loss of large salmon because government will not invest in adapting fishing gear to save the salmon. Work needs to start in 2021 to make our commercial fisheries more eco-friendly by reducing by-catch.

Respect for Anglers. As salmon numbers get lower, the first reaction of government is to place more restrictions on anglers. Anglers are reduced to catch and release now and the next move is to close the sport fishing industry. What a tragic mistake that would be. Anglers love their sport and are the driving force to save the salmon and are the first to report any illegal activity or habitat disturbance. Stopping salmon angling hasn't helped the Saint John River, the Kouchibouguac River or the Richibucto River get their salmon runs back and it won't help on the Miramichi either. Reducing commercial by-catch would save far more salmon than closing salmon angling.

These are just a few of the battles ahead in 2021 and if the government was motivated to help the Atlantic salmon, they could take the lead to make some of these decisions. This would motivate the troops to continue the fight to win the war for the salmon. We can't let COVID-19 be an excuse to delay making the critical decisions and actions to restore our salmon population. We don't have enough time left.