

'The ocean is the war': The \$9M fight to save Miramichi salmon

STEPHEN LLEWELLYN | The Daily Gleaner

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An ambitious \$9-million project to save the Miramichi River's flagging Atlantic salmon stocks will kick into high gear this September.

Photo: Tom Moffatt, Atlantic Salmon Federation

An ambitious \$9-million project to save the Miramichi River's flagging Atlantic salmon stocks will kick into high gear this September.

In 2015 and 2016 thousands of young wild salmon, called smolt, were captured before they left the river for the ocean.

They are being raised to adulthood in tanks at the Miramichi Salmon Association hatchery at South Esk and will be released back into the river in one to three years, avoiding the dangerous journey out into the ocean, said Tommi Linnansaari a research associate at the Canadian Rivers Institute in the Department of Biology at the University of New Brunswick.

Linnansaari is also science coordinator for CAST (Collaboration for Atlantic Salmon Tomorrow).

CAST, which just wrapped up a two-day conference in Fredericton, is a group of government, non-government, and industry partners created in response to sharply declining wild salmon stocks. The CAST project is called the adult salmon release program, and the tank survival rate should be about 90 per cent, said Linnansaari.

Stocks of Atlantic salmon in most rivers in this region have fallen to dangerously low levels, resulting in strict catch-and-release rules. The New Brunswick Salmon Council is advocating a river-by-river management system to allow anglers to keep some of their catch where stocks are stronger. But the Atlantic Salmon Federation says it is too soon for such a step.

CAST, meanwhile, is focused on making sure more salmon wind up back in the Miramichi River.

The survival rate for wild salmon returning to the river from the ocean is just one per cent, said Linnansaari.

Traditionally a hatchery just raises young fish and releases them into the wild and they head out into the ocean, he said.

"The ocean is the war," he said in an interview on Wednesday. "Instead of going to war (the project salmon) go to the spa and gets the spa treatment. You're bypassing the trouble part."

The released fish will be closely monitored to see whether being raised in tanks adversely affects them, he said.

The long-term goal of the project is to boost the population of the wild salmon on the river. But it will be six or seven years before the scientists know if the offspring of the tank-raised wild salmon will show up in larger numbers than normal, he said.

It's called a supplementation project, and Linnansaari said it is just a stop-gap solution until scientists figure out what is killing all the Atlantic salmon in the ocean.

"But we have to do something in the meanwhile," he said.

Mark Hambrook, president of the Miramichi Salmon Association, said a small collection of salmon smolt were taken in 2015 for the project and 5,000 were collected in 2016.

Another 5,000 smolt will be collected in a few weeks, he said.

Salmon mature at different rates and the project's first adult salmon will be released back into the river from the tanks this September, he said.

"We need to do that many fish to be able to fully assess it," said Hambrook. "We wanted to do this before the population crashes and you're worried about not being able to collect enough "

The effort is being focused on the northwest Miramichi River, which is the weaker tributary of the river system in terms of salmon returns, he said.

Shirley Roach-Albert, executive director of CAST, said approximately 500 salmon would be released this fall.

Barry Berejikian works for the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration in Washington State, where a similar strategy has been used successfully to supplement Steel Head trout stocks for almost 20 years.

He shared his experiences at the conference based on smaller rivers and smaller fish stocks.

"We're finding there is an increase even after the program is over," said Berejikian.


Christine Kozfkay, principal fisheries research biologist with the Idaho Department of Fish and Game, has also been doing a supplementation project with Chinook and Sockeye salmon for nearly 20 years.

The project only involved 300 fish, but there was a definite benefit, she said.

"We're here to share what we learned," she said.

The funding partners for the project are ACOA, the province of New Brunswick, UNB, Fisheries and Oceans Canada, the Restigouche River Watershed Management Council, the Miramichi Salmon Association, the Canadian Rivers Institute, Cooke Aquaculture and J.D. Irving, Limited.

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If the Federal Department of Fisheries is not willing to do anything about the real problem with the reason for the decline of the Atlantic Salmon , then sorry , but you just wasted another 9 million dollars !! Ask the people like Jim Lakes or any of the outfitters and they will tell you why the salmon have disappeared! When you start listening to the these people you will learn the two biggest problems are the stripped bass and the seal population and until something is done ,please stop wasting money .