

Local anglers hope to revive St. Marys River

Declining salmon runs, acid rain threaten waterway's sport fishery

By AARON BESWICK Truro Bureau STILLWATER

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Brett Jordan is an avid fly fisherman. Like other anglers on the St. Marys River, he's no longer allowed to fish for salmon but enjoys fishing for sea-run speckled trout. (AARON BESWICK / Truro Bureau)



Bill Carpan, owner of River Magic Productions, moved to Stillwater, Guysborough County, to be near the St. Marys River in his retirement. He is pictured tying a fishing fly. (AARON BESWICK / Truro Bureau)

STANDING ON ITS BANKS, a visitor to the St. Marys River sees it tumbling to the sea.

But Bill Carpan sees it differently.

To the lifelong angler, the river is an artery of the dark Atlantic that wends its way 110 kilometres past his Stillwater door into Guysborough County.

By mid-May, the first salmon and sea-run speckled trout will return home from those dark Atlantic waters to work upstream and spawn in the gentle tributaries where they were born. On this morning, like every morning, Carpan is hosting fellow anglers at his fishing supply store, River Magic Productions. And like every morning, they're talking fish.

"All those years of work were a lead-up to this," Carpan said of retiring with his wife, Brenda Carpan, to the banks of the St. Marys to open the store.

"The river is a gathering place not just for people but for wildlife. You see and learn the migrations of the American eel, gaspereaux, shad and the birds, the cormorants, mergansers, eagle and osprey."

But lately there's more bad news than good.

Since the early 1980s, salmon runs have been in steady decline. Two years ago, catch-and-release salmon angling was banned on the St. Marys, so Carpan and his customers re-gearred to angle for trout. Then this spring, the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada released a recommendation to Fisheries and Oceans Canada that salmon along the Atlantic seaboard of mainland Nova Scotia, an area known as the Southern Upland, be listed as endangered.

"Something is happening to them out there in that big black box of an ocean, but no one really knows what it is," said Carl Purcell, president of the Nova Scotia Salmon Association.

The Atlantic is a hard place, and after leaving the St. Marys, young smolts swim north, some going as far as Greenland to feed and grow. During the 1980s, when runs were good, Purcell said only about six per cent survived to return home and spawn. Current estimates put at-sea survival at about two per cent. The association estimates that Southern Upland salmon runs are on average at 25 per cent of historic levels. Only 46 of the 63 Southern Upland rivers once known to host salmon runs still do.

And for those salmon that do return home, the rivers of the Southern Upland aren't the places they once were.

"All those rivers are affected by acid rain," Purcell said.

Thousands of metres above the salmon and those who love them, winds howl from the southwest, carrying sulphur dioxide produced by industry in the Ohio Valley and southern Ontario, dropping it in the form of rain on Nova Scotia. Over a century and a half, acid rain stripped our soils of the elements that had neutralized its effects, eliminating what Purcell calls our buffering capacity.

"But we're all guilty on this. Nova Scotia has coal-burning power plants, too," Purcell said.

And yet the battle hasn't been all downhill. Over the past 30 years, both Canada and the U.S. have legislated Clean Air Acts, putting controls on industry and automobiles to limit acid rain. In 1984, commercial fishing of salmon was banned on the St. Marys, and by the early 1990s, similar bans were put in place along the Canadian eastern seaboard.

"I'm an eternal optimist," said Shane O'Neil, a Fisheries Department biologist. "Last year, there was an increase in at-sea survival for many rivers. Whatever changes occurred that have affected the population could potentially be reversed."

But O'Neil was quick to add that scientists have a very limited knowledge of the Atlantic Ocean's complex ecosystem. In August, the Fisheries Department will review the recommendation from the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada that the salmon stocks be listed as endangered.

"If (the Department of Fisheries and Oceans) list them as endangered under the Species at Risk Act, the provisions of that act would demand DFO take strong action to protect them," O'Neil said.

Back at River Magic, Carpan has been worried about a rumour that he and his fellow anglers may be banned from trouting on the river as a way to limit salmon bycatch.

"When a salmon is hooked, it's released and continues on its way," Carpan said. "Anglers are the eyes and ears of a river and the best deterrent to poaching."

On his way to the river, 17-year-old Brett Jordan stopped by to talk trout and eye the latest flies, tied locally, for sale at River Magic — including intricate and colourful creations like The Bomber, tied by Chris Williams of Sheet Harbour from deer hair, calf tail and rooster feather.

"There's nothing like it," said Jordan, who brings his sea trout home to his mother or drops them off with "old fellers" that can't get out anymore.

"You spend time with your buddies, it's peaceful and quiet and no one's bothering you."

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