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## **Standing Committee on Fisheries and Oceans**

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**EVIDENCE**

**Monday, April 1, 2019**

**Chair**

**Mr. Ken McDonald**



## Standing Committee on Fisheries and Oceans

Monday, April 1, 2019

• (1605)

[English]

**The Chair (Mr. Ken McDonald (Avalon, Lib.)):** Good afternoon, everyone. Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), we are studying the impact of the rapid increase in striped bass in the Miramichi River and the Gulf of St. Lawrence.

For the first part of our meeting this afternoon, we have from the Department of Fisheries and Oceans Mr. Serge Doucet, the regional director general for the gulf region, and Mr. Doug Bliss, regional director of science for the gulf region.

We welcome both of you to our study this afternoon. When you're ready, you can make your presentation.

**Mr. Serge Doucet (Regional Director General, Gulf Region, Department of Fisheries and Oceans):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

First, thank you for inviting us today. This is an opportunity for us to discuss the future of striped bass, a valued species that presents great potential but that should, at the same time, remain the subject of close monitoring.

[Translation]

The Gulf Region includes a wide area covering 240,000 square kilometres, bordering 7,000 kilometres of coastline. It has less than 1% of Canada's waters but accounts for 15% of the total catch value of all Canadian fisheries. In 2017, a total of 11,261 fish harvesters caught 83,014 tons of fish and crustaceans worth an approximate landed value of \$838 million.

[English]

The importance of fishing and aquaculture in our corner of the country cannot be understated. Entire communities are built around those industries and they expect us at DFO to help protect and manage the resource. To that effect, one-third of our workforce is dedicated to science. Our scientists work in labs, conduct surveys in the field or do research on various species, marine protected areas or species at risk. Ongoing consultation and engagement with our partners from fishing communities, industry and first nations allow us to make the right decisions based on scientific data and facts.

However, science itself is insufficient. The gulf region has more than 100 fisheries officers working in communities and coastal areas to enforce regulations under the Fisheries Act.

The recent history of striped bass is a good news story. From depleted populations in the mid-1990s, striped bass has now rebounded to the levels we see today.

[Translation]

Now, some have suggested that there may be a link between that increase in striped bass populations and the decreased populations of Atlantic salmon.

[English]

However, studies by DFO have not been able to establish such a direct causality. In fact, a decline in the abundance of Atlantic salmon has taken place in all areas of eastern North America, including places where there are no striped bass, or the phenomenon of striped bass increase has not taken place. Similar declines in the population of Atlantic salmon are also being recorded in the European range.

A variety of factors could explain the decrease in salmon populations. For instance, we can no longer ignore the warming climate, which led to unprecedented angling closures in 2018 as rivers reached temperatures lethal to Atlantic salmon, a species best suited to colder water. Striped bass is native to the Miramichi River system, but it ranges all the way to Florida and has proven well adapted to warmer waters.

[Translation]

The study of aquatic species is very intricate. In managing one species, the realities of other species occupying a same ecosystem have to be taken into account. More studies are needed if we are to understand what is going on, and that's what our scientists are doing.

[English]

We believe in an adaptive approach to improving resource management, exploring alternatives to meet management objectives, predicting outcomes and using the results to update knowledge and adjust management actions. As part of our adaptive approach, we've increased recreational access to striped bass and established a pilot for commercial access for first nations.

Striped bass is a valued species that does have the potential to become a considerable economic driver in our region. Its recovery is a positive story, but we must remain prudent. The population of spawners decreased by two-thirds between our 2017 and 2018 stock assessments, possibly due to the thicker than usual ice coverage during that winter. This is reminder that bass populations are much more variable than those of salmon, and a few bad years could result in a catastrophic decline.

[Translation]

On this, my colleague Doug Bliss will now add more scientific insight on the subject.

[English]

**Mr. Doug Bliss (Regional Director, Science, Gulf Region, Department of Fisheries and Oceans):** Thank you, members of the committee, for allowing me to speak to you today concerning what science knows about striped bass and planned science activities moving forward.

My name is Doug Bliss, and I am the director of the science branch for the gulf region of Fisheries and Oceans Canada. It's our scientific staff, located in Moncton, New Brunswick, and our Miramichi River research station, located at South Esk, who conduct the federal government's striped bass science program in the southern Gulf of St. Lawrence.

I'll start by briefly showing the range and distribution of this native species. Striped bass is a saltwater bass, and is native to the Gulf of St. Lawrence. Striped bass, with all other diadromous species that live in both fresh and salt water, including Atlantic salmon, have evolved together in rivers in eastern North America since the retreat of the last ice age. You can see in this range map a graphic showing the extent of striped bass, ranging from northern Florida to Canada. We are at the northern extent of its range.

Generally speaking, our striped bass are shorter, smaller, and shorter-lived than those found in the United States, where the core of their population live. Many of you will know of the seasonal movements of striped bass in the Miramichi River. After spawning, they leave the river and migrate to coastal areas to feed. In the late fall, they return to estuaries, not just the Miramichi, and spend the winter under the ice in what we call a torpid state. That means they do not move very much, nor do they feed until waters start to warm up. Upon spawning in the northwest Miramichi River, typically mid-May to mid-June, they rapidly move to the sea and repeat their annual cycle.

We have records of striped bass being harvested commercially in the southern Gulf of St. Lawrence dating back 102 years, as illustrated in this graphic. Note the pattern of high harvest being followed by declining harvests a hundred ago in the 1920s, and more recently in the 1980s. Through such harvest records, we infer that population levels follow similar trends.

In the interest of time, I will not dwell on this slide about the status of species at risk or of striped bass, but I will just say that in 2012, seven years ago, all the populations of striped bass in Canada were assessed to be at some level of risk of extinction.

With regard to striped bass abundance, Fisheries and Oceans Canada scientists have been monitoring the spawning population of

striped bass in the Miramichi since 1994. This is a 24-year dataset consistently measured in the same way every year, and so it is the only reliable indicator of whether the striped bass population in the southern gulf is growing or shrinking. You will notice that we started monitoring striped bass in 1994, before the population crash. The population crashed in 1996, and was at critically low levels for five years. This was followed by some modest growth for another six years, after which there was consistent growth trend after 2006, peaking in 2017.

If we have learned something about this species in the last two decades, it is that it can go through rapid population increases and decreases in relatively short periods of time. Why this happens is something we are seeking to understand. This is why it is important, when considering the status of a population of fish or other wildlife, to look at the trend over a number of years. The population estimates for the upcoming year, 2019, which we will produce at the end of this calendar year, will be very important for us to assess whether the population seems to be continuing to increase, decrease, or stabilize.

Last, I would like to take a moment to explain our federal science activities and to let you know of our plans to conduct more science on this species. We have been monitoring the adult striped bass in a consistent way since 1994. We tag striped bass every year in order to monitor their movements in the southern Gulf of St. Lawrence and, more recently, farther north. We have tried to determine whether there are other established spawning areas for striped bass a number of years ago, but we will undertake such studies once again. We have directly measured the consumption of salmon young, or smolts, and many other species by striped bass. We have worked in partnership with other organizations, such as the Atlantic Salmon Federation, on determining indirect estimates of predation. We plan to continued such collaborative studies on diet. We are using technologies that were not available to us even a few years ago to better understand striped bass and their habitats.

● (1610)

Currently, we are undertaking proof-of-concept development of environmental DNA to easily test for the presence or absence of striped bass in rivers. We are transferring our expertise in acoustic measurements of fish for marine species such as herring and applying this technology on the river, advancing technology on the river to see if we can more accurately and rapidly assess the population of striped bass adults before the fishing season. The picture on the lower right corner of the slide indicates our crew out there in the winter testing this technology through the ice on the Miramichi River.

We intend to do much of this new science in collaboration with interested research and science partners. Our proposed science plan is split into three parts to provide biological reference points for the species; to examine or re-examine recurring questions about the species, such as striped bass diet measurements and assessing whether other spawning areas exist; and finally, to undertake focused studies to understand the environmental stresses and ecosystem dynamics influencing this and many other species.

Thank you.

**The Chair:** Thank you, gentlemen, for that presentation.

Before we go to the questioning, I would like to recognize René Arseneault, MP for Madawaska—Restigouche, on the government side. As well, welcome back to Mr. Sopuck, from the riding of Dauphin—Swan River—Neepawa.

Welcome, gentlemen.

• (1615)

**Mr. Robert Sopuck (Dauphin—Swan River—Neepawa, CPC):** Thank you.

**The Chair:** I know we were a little bit late starting due to a vote. Would it be okay if we agreed to do one round of seven minutes for this particular session? It will go a little past 3:30, but not much. It will give each party a chance to get at least a few questions in.

Mr. Finnigan, for seven minutes or fewer, please.

**Mr. Pat Finnigan (Miramichi—Grand Lake, Lib.):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to the officials, Monsieur Serge Doucet and Doug Bliss, for being here with us today.

This study of striped bass is something that I wanted to get in, because I live on the Miramichi and I have been talking to the people, the stakeholders. I've been to several meetings. We're going to have a chance to question some of the stakeholders after this second hour.

One of the questions I'm always asking, which people are sometimes confused about, is how the science is applied and how the numbers come about. Before the explosion of the population, for instance, one of the major questions.... We never closed the river for the spawning season, and now we are in this...over a million spawners, and we decided to close the river. Those things are not very consistent with science.

Can you explain that? Do you have a reference number for when you start doing things to manage the population?

Either of you can answer, Serge or Doug.

**Mr. Serge Doucet:** I think my colleague Doug is probably better equipped to answer that question.

**Mr. Doug Bliss:** Mr. Finnigan, we use traditional techniques used throughout wildlife science to measure the fish, called "mark-recapture" techniques, which essentially involve tagging fish and recapturing them at some location later, and from that you can infer their population. It's what is done in virtually all wildlife fields. That's the technique we use. In our trap nets on the Miramichi, we're also tagging fish consistently and tracking them throughout the Gulf

of Saint Lawrence for their movements. But I think the most important thing for us is that we now have a long-term dataset, and even though it may not be the perfect monitoring system, we can develop trends, which is most important for wildlife management.

In terms of how it gets applied, I can assure you that every year when we produce our reports that are made public through the Canadian Science Advisory Secretariat—done in January of this year—our fisheries management folks undertake to take a look at the status of the population. As you can see from the past few years, there's been an adaptive management approach to science indicators and management response.

**Mr. Pat Finnigan:** You spoke a little while ago about why we have those cycles—going up and down. Apparently this last year we had striped bass all the way up to Labrador, something that apparently has never been seen before. Why do you think this is happening to a greater extent? Does it have anything to do with the warming of the waters, or do you have any other theories?

**Mr. Doug Bliss:** In terms of what happened in 2017, you can see a peak in the graph of our estimate of the average number of fish there. There were close to a million. Why the fish decided to "prospect", as we call it, into further areas in the north in that particular year is unknown. It's exactly what happened, though. It would seem that they collectively decided to go out and prospect to see if there were other places to live. They were observed as far north as Lake Melville in Labrador. We know that many of them were captured by commercial trawls around the Great Northern Peninsula of Newfoundland. Subsequently, from many, many reports, many of those fish....

As usually happens with wildlife species, these probably weren't the adult fish. These were juveniles. They were teenagers. We see this all the time with wildlife species. They do stupid things like stay in the north. So we think they stayed in the rivers they went to and that most of them died because of the cold conditions during the winter.

• (1620)

**Mr. Pat Finnigan:** Bobby, do you have a question, because we only have seven minutes on this one?

**Mr. Robert Morrissey (Egmont, Lib.):** Sure. Thanks.

Mr. Doucet, I believe you said there's no evidence of a direct cause that striped bass are affecting the stock of other species. Am I correct on that?

**Mr. Serge Doucet:** Yes. I think what I was trying to convey there, Mr. Morrissey, was that we know that striped bass are predators and that they will feed on salmon smolts, but it's not definitive that it's the only cause of the reduction of Atlantic salmon stocks in the rivers. It's not direct causality. Other elements are causing Atlantic salmon to decline, not only in our rivers but I guess in the rivers across the world too.

**Mr. Robert Morrissey:** You made reference to a warming climate as one possible cause-effect.

**Mr. Serge Doucet:** It's one of the elements that I believe we've continued to be consistent—

**Mr. Robert Morrissey:** Do you have data on how much the water is warming over a cyclical period or a defined period? And could you table that with the committee?

**Mr. Serge Doucet:** We do have some of that data.

**Mr. Doug Bliss:** We didn't have time to put it in the deck today, but we have a long time series that shows—

**Mr. Robert Morrissey:** If you want to look at July or August or any particular month, how far back can you go?

**Mr. Doug Bliss:** We go back with air temperature, and we make reference to water temperature. We have air temperature records going back to the late 1800s.

**Mr. Robert Morrissey:** From that, have you seen a significant change?

**Mr. Doug Bliss:** There is an augmentation of average river temperature over time that is consistent and continuing.

**Mr. Robert Morrissey:** Interesting. Can you provide that to the committee?

**Mr. Doug Bliss:** Yes, we can.

**Mr. Robert Morrissey:** We often hear that the department does not consult well. You made reference to “ongoing” consultation. Could you provide some evidence to the committee of how you consult with stakeholders?

**Mr. Serge Doucet:** On an annual basis, we have our recreational advisory tables that meet with stakeholders and indigenous communities throughout Atlantic Canada on all our recreational species. Again, in December of this year, I believe, we had our most recent recreational—

**Mr. Robert Morrissey:** I know you say that you meet, but sometimes, from the criticism the committee gets, the stakeholders are given short notice and are not prepared to respond.

**Mr. Serge Doucet:** Again, I think it's published usually with at least a few weeks' notice for stakeholders to join. All stakeholders who are members of our stakeholder groups are always invited to attend. The results of the advisory committees are always posted online and are publicly available to everyone to be able to review what was discussed and debated. They always have the opportunity to ask questions afterwards as well.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Morrissey.

From the Conservative side we have Mr. Sopuck.

You have seven minutes or less, please.

**Mr. Robert Sopuck:** Thanks.

I disagree very strongly with your view about striped bass predation. From the studies I've seen, there's about a 2% to 10% smolt survival out of the Miramichi, given that all the striped bass in the Gulf of St. Lawrence spawn there, versus 70% smolt survival out of the rest. These are Atlantic Salmon Federation numbers. Obviously, open ocean mortality is quite high, so I think your dismissing of predation of salmon smolts is unwarranted.

Regarding what happened in 2014, when then minister Keith Ashfield instituted a harvest of striped bass, the department was very much against what Minister Ashfield did. That's based on reports I've seen that said, for instance, “Despite resistance within his department, a limited striped bass fishing season was introduced”.

Given that Minister Ashfield introduced a harvest of striped bass at that time, did that harvest affect the striped bass population?

**Mr. Serge Doucet:** As we can tell by the continued increase in populations of striped bass from 2014 to 2018, we can see that the population kept increasing, even with continued increase in—how should I say—incremental access. From 2014—

**Mr. Robert Sopuck:** Okay. That's fine. I get the picture. We can conclude, then, that you gave the then minister bad advice.

Now, this is something I've been hearing right across as I travel across Atlantic Canada; for a prairie person, I've spent a fair bit of time out there. I've been on the fisheries committee for eight years, and this is a constant theme from your department: bad advice, studies all the time, no consultation and regulations that are promulgated way too late for the industry. Given your population estimate for the striped bass, what are your confidence limits for that population estimate?

**Mr. Serge Doucet:** Doug, can you...?

**Mr. Doug Bliss:** For the population estimate, as you can see from the graph that's displayed of the most current population, the average population estimate is 333,000. The confidence ranges from 154,000 to 623,000.

• (1625)

**Mr. Robert Sopuck:** Okay. There are 154,000 to 600,000 fish. It's somewhere in there, so when the department says there are 300,000 fish, it's a very, very fuzzy number.

I want to talk about something quite different, but it's related to the survival of the Atlantic salmon. There's a time bomb on the Miramichi called the Miramichi Lake. The Miramichi Salmon Association and a number of groups have put forward a very sophisticated proposal to rotenone the smallmouth bass in that lake, which are clearly an invasive non-native species. That time bomb means that if the smallmouth bass enter the Miramichi, they will easily colonize the Miramichi, with dreadful mortality results for smolts.

Why are you holding back on the program to rotenone Miramichi Lake given that rotenone has been used in thousands of situations worldwide and is the most benign and safe fish toxicant that can ever be used?

**Mr. Serge Doucet:** Thank you for the question.

At this point in time, we're working with our proponents, the North Shore Micmac District Council, on a proposal exactly to that effect. Once we receive the proposal from the work group, we'll be able to—

**Mr. Robert Sopuck:** Working on that proposal is not good enough. That is a time bomb. What's holding the smallmouth bass back from the Miramichi, I've been told, is a rack or a net. If there's a major flood, look out.

In terms of our Atlantic salmon report that this committee did, I want to commend all members of this committee. It was a very comprehensive report, and it was universal. When I look at the minister's response to the report, given that it was probably written by the department.... We had a major recommendation, number 9, where we talked about "a recovery plan to rebuild" the "stocks to, at minimum, 1975 levels". My colleague Mr. Arnold insisted on that, yet when I see the minister's response, the words "recovery" and "rebuild" do not appear. Why is that?

**Mr. Serge Doucet:** It's a good question.

**Mr. Robert Sopuck:** Okay. That's fine. I don't have much time. You obviously don't know what the answer is. I'm not blaming you. The minister's signature is on this, not yours. I know where these kinds of things come from, and I think it's a travesty to not have "recovery" in there.

In terms of recommendation 14 from our report, we talked about the striped bass issue, but again, in the minister's letter, it was ignored. On invasive species, for example, we had a major recommendation about the issue of striped bass and smallmouth bass. It was mentioned in our report and unanimously supported. This report was done three years ago. The smallmouth bass issue was on the table then, yet nothing has been done. Why is that?

**Mr. Serge Doucet:** On the question of the smallmouth bass on the Miramichi Lake piece, again, we're working with the North Shore Mimac District Council on a proposed solution.

When it comes to recommendations 14 and 15 of this committee's report in 2017, both of those have been implemented. Since that report has been tabled, we've increased access to striped bass for a recreational perspective from a moderated level of one striped bass in the spring, one striped bass retention in the fall and two striped bass during the middle of the season to three striped bass for the entire period of the season. As well, with recommendation 15, which is to "investigate the opportunity for a First Nations striped bass commercial fishery", in which we—

**Mr. Robert Sopuck:** Yes, I'm aware there was supposed to be a spring fishery for the first nations, but the licence didn't arrive until the middle of summer, after the fish had left.

I'm really surprised as well that the issue of seals wasn't brought up in the minister's letter. Recommendation 13 was unanimously supported by this committee to reduce the number of seals. I'd like to refer to a newspaper article in The Globe and Mail regarding a study that Peter Olesiuk of your department did. It talked about how three dozen seals killed 10,000 adult chum salmon in the fall spawning run. Granted, this was in B.C. In terms of fry, they can take up to 60 to 70 chum fry per minute.

In terms of Atlantic salmon, for example, a study in Scotland found that taking a single seal out of a river in Scotland increased the sport salmon catch by 17%, yet there was nothing mentioned about a seal harvest in the minister's letter. The department is running away from an increased seal harvest, in spite of the fact that most of the

reports of the fisheries committees that I've been on—and I've been on them since 2010—have strongly and unanimously recommended an increased seal harvest.

Why are you so adamant in your opposition to an increased seal harvest when the data are there to prove that will work?

•(1630)

**Mr. Serge Doucet:** Doug.

**Mr. Doug Bliss:** We understand that an Atlantic seal advisory committee has been established to look at this question.

**Mr. Robert Sopuck:** Thank you.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Sopuck.

Now on to the NDP. Mr. Johns, you have seven minutes or less, please.

**Mr. Gord Johns (Courtenay—Alberni, NDP):** Thank you, Mr. Bliss and Mr. Doucet, for your testimony. It's greatly appreciated.

I'll just start with a couple of questions. We've seen huge fluctuations in numbers of striped bass in the southern Gulf of St. Lawrence. In your view, what has led to the fluctuations in the striped bass population? Is there a risk to the health of the ecosystem, caused by the fluctuating striped bass population?

Maybe Mr. Bliss can answer that.

**Mr. Doug Bliss:** Yes, I can tackle that.

A couple of things are clear. The question about warming waters and climate change came up. A lot of this is mixed in with the fact that the entire ecosystem is changing because of global change. The warming temperatures that we see—not only in the ocean, but in the river itself—favour the development of striped bass.

At the same time, we see other diadromous species such as as smelt and gaspereau having trouble in the Miramichi River. What we're seeing is that the ecosystem is changing—not only in the Miramichi, but in many of our rivers. Because we've never seen these kinds of changes before, it's a continual challenge to try to keep up to try to understand where the end point is or could be in terms of the ecosystem changes.

**Mr. Gord Johns:** Yes. You said you have a hundred staff working in the southern Gulf of St. Lawrence doing assessments and monitoring. Is that enough? Do you believe the data are accurate in predicting the annual population change? It seems that hasn't been the case.

**Mr. Serge Doucet:** The hundred staff are for enforcement in the gulf region. That's the enforcement side. It's not the science and—

**Mr. Gord Johns:** Do you think you have enough resources to get the right data? Clearly there have been fluctuations that have been well above or under DFO predictions. In terms of the modelling that you're using, it's kind of hard to see that it's been successful so far. Is that correct?

**Mr. Doug Bliss:** One thing that we're doing, for example, is something called the Atlantic salmon research joint venture, which was started by the department. It's basically a coalition of the science community working on Atlantic salmon to study these kinds of issues. It's pretty clear that the extent of expertise in any single agency such as ours is not sufficient, because you need a whole range of different expertise.

We're now working in broad collaboration with experts in the academic community and other communities to bring the resources to bear—mostly the intellectual capacity—to be able to tackle these questions.

**Mr. Gord Johns:** Can you correct me if I'm wrong here?

The 2017 spawner abundance assessment is no longer on DFO's website. Why was the 2017 spawner abundance assessment removed from DFO's website?

Can you clarify that?

**Mr. Doug Bliss:** I'm sorry, sir. I don't have an answer to that question.

**Mr. Gord Johns:** Thanks.

In terms of DFO's consultation with first nations, how did you calculate 25,000 as the total allowable catch of striped bass?

**Mr. Serge Doucet:** The allocation for the first nations communities is 50,000 striped bass: 25,000 in the spring and 25,000 in the fall.

**Mr. Gord Johns:** Okay, thank you.

**Mr. Serge Doucet:** It's calculated by working through our science and our resource management folks to find a model that would allow for sufficient fish to be viable, but also to give us a good idea of the impact on the population as a whole.

**Mr. Gord Johns:** Is the department resourcing the nations with assistance or grants to help the nations enter into commercial striped bass fisheries, or are any resources being allocated?

**Mr. Serge Doucet:** We haven't, to this point, but it's something we're exploring, yes.

**Mr. Gord Johns:** Okay.

In terms of the striped bass population in the Miramichi growing at a dramatic rate, the populations in neighbouring rivers and jurisdictions are varying. Obviously, we saw that in Maine they handle it differently. Can you maybe talk about some of the best practices that you learned from Maine and how they're doing things differently, which can be applied in the southern gulf?

**Mr. Doug Bliss:** Are you talking about fishing practices or management practices?

**Mr. Gord Johns:** Sorry, that's right; I meant management practices, yes.

**Mr. Doug Bliss:** What we do know about the States is that they have a completely different management regime. They have fisheries commissions of the various states.

Actually, in our opinion, because we have a consistent approach in Canada and even in Quebec... Because we work closely with our colleagues in Quebec on regulations, you'll note that fishing

regulations between us and the Province of Quebec are very similar. You won't find the same homogeneity in regulations in the United States, so it varies quite a bit from state to state. We actually think that the system in Canada is more robust than the system in the United States.

● (1635)

**Mr. Gord Johns:** Do you want to speak maybe about some of the factors that should be considered to maintain a healthy population of the striped bass in the southern Gulf of St. Lawrence? Is there anything you would like to bring forward?

**Mr. Doug Bliss:** It's an open question.

**Mr. Gord Johns:** Yes, well, what factors, really, do you think should be considered the most as the high priority?

**Mr. Doug Bliss:** Well, as I mentioned, ecological change and trying to understand where that is going, I think is the biggest question for us, not only of striped bass but of salmon as well, because their survival at sea—which is the major issue for Atlantic salmon from the consensus of the science community—is also centred on what's happening in the ocean and why.

**Mr. Gord Johns:** It leads me back to this question. Do you feel that you're adequately resourced in the department to do that important work to ensure they're protected?

**Mr. Doug Bliss:** I know in my particular organization we have an adequate number of resources. But as I said before, to use the expression "It takes a village", it really does at this point in time take a collaborative effort among all the expertise in many different institutions to be able to tackle these problems.

**Mr. Gord Johns:** Okay.

I think I've finished. Thanks.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Johns.

Thank you to our guests today for their patience in getting through the first session.

I would like to thank Mr. Bliss for mentioning prospecting in the Labrador region. Labrador is no stranger to prospecting, by any means.

Again, thank you for your appearance here before committee today.

**Mr. Serge Doucet:** Thank you.

**The Chair:** We'll suspend for a moment just to change for the next group.

● (1635)

\_\_\_\_\_ (Pause) \_\_\_\_\_

● (1640)

**The Chair:** We'll get started again.

Here with us for the next hour we have a number of witnesses.

From the Miramichi Salmon Association Inc., we have Mr. Mark Hambrook, president. From the Miramichi Watershed Management Committee Inc., we have Deborah Norton, president. From the North Shore Micmac District Council, we have chief executive officer Chief George Ginnish. From the Atlantic Salmon Federation, we have Mr. Bill Taylor, president and chief executive officer.

As well, there was a last-minute addition. There are two witnesses from the New Brunswick Salmon Council joining us by telephone, Mr. John Pugh and Mr. John Bagnall.

We'll go to Mr. Taylor, first, for seven minutes or less, please.

**Mr. Bill Taylor (President and Chief Executive Officer, Atlantic Salmon Federation):** Great. Thank you, and good afternoon, Mr. Chairman, vice-chairs, and members of the committee.

I'm Bill Taylor, president of the Atlantic Salmon Federation. It's a pleasure of mine to present to you today on the topic of striped bass in the Gulf of St. Lawrence, and in particular their impact on wild Atlantic salmon.

First, as a bit of history on the Atlantic Salmon Federation, we've been around for 71 years. We're a true federation. We have regional councils in each of the five eastern provinces and the state of Maine. We represent more than 100 local, river-based conservation organizations with more than 25,000 members and volunteers; and throughout our history, we've made a number of important contributions to Atlantic salmon conservation both in Canada and internationally.

Today, one of the greatest challenges facing Atlantic salmon conservation, especially on the Miramichi, comes from striped bass.

I ask you to picture this just for a second, if you would. Three weeks every spring from the end of May or early June the entire population of striped bass in the southern Gulf of St. Lawrence, up to a million spawners, are jammed into a six-and-a-half kilometre stretch of the northwest Miramichi. At the same time, little salmon smolts are trying to migrate out to sea. What happens when the two meet? Well, ASF is in a pretty good position to shed some light on that.

Since 2003 we've tagged and tracked nearly 3,000 smolt leaving four Gulf of St. Lawrence rivers. In recent years the number of smolt from the Miramichi that survive their migration to the estuary has spiralled downward. Survival in other rivers has remained relatively constant.

We know striped bass aren't fussy eaters. They eat juvenile salmon and species like alewives and smelt. There have been several studies carried out and discussed by this committee. However, their results are often taken out of context and sometimes misunderstood.

Take, for example, DFO's stomach analysis content study that you heard about just recently. It was never designed as a salmon predation study. It was a very first look at what the bass eat and it had its limitations. The takeaway is 2%. Two per cent of the stomach content was Atlantic salmon. Okay, so that's not a big number, but obviously as the striped bass population increases, the predation of smolt, the number of smolt eaten, increases.

You've also heard about ASF's predation study, and we built upon our existing smolt tracking program to determine when smolt are eaten by bass, based on movement patterns.

You often hear of the figure in our study of 2% to 18% predation of salmon smolts in any given year. Those are absolute minimum values. The bass had to hold the tag smolt in its belly for four days

for the model to work. This is a significant limitation and it needs to be recognized. So, the study shed more light on striped bass predation of smolt, but it's not the full story.

The best and most complete picture to date comes from ASF's long-term smolt tracking data. Using this information, ASF and DFO recently published the world's longest peer-reviewed study on wild Atlantic salmon, looking at 14 years of smolt tracking from the Gulf of St. Lawrence rivers: the northwest Miramichi, southwest Miramichi, the Restigouche and the Grand Caspédia. We found that in the Restigouche and Caspédia, smolt survival through their estuaries was relatively high and consistent, ranging between 70% and 95% over the length of the study.

On the Miramichi, smolt survival was similar to the Caspédia and Restigouche up until about 2010 when the striped bass population exploded. Between 2010 and 2017, bass abundance climbed from 60,000 to a million spawners, and smolt survival plummeted.

Through the estuary, from a consistent 70%—the same as the Caspédia and Restigouche—smolt survival went down to just 8%. All the while, in Restigouche and Caspédia the survival rate stayed at that same 70% or so.

How can we expect the Miramichi to recover, if only 8% of the smolt are making it out through the estuary?

Your committee is studying where to set many different reference points, where humans should intervene when it comes to striped bass for the benefit of the overall ecosystem. We're encouraged by this inquiry, and we have been requesting clear management direction, information and objectives from DFO for a long time.

The number of adult spawning striped bass in 2018 was estimated at 330,000—the second-highest on record. So, despite the one-year decline from 2017 from a million to 333,000, that 333,000 is still 10 times the recovery target that was set back by DFO, and this warrants action.

It's reasonable for people to ask for a mix of species in their fisheries and for DFO to manage towards that. We're not asking for favouritism of one species over another, but in effect, this is exactly what has happened as a result of DFO inaction. Striped bass have recovered and are still protected to the point where native fish populations like salmon, alewife, smelt, and sea-run brook trout are at risk.

● (1645)

In fairness, we have been encouraged by the small steps the department has taken, such as increased recreational bag limits and the issuance of the licence for Eel Ground First Nation's commercial bass fishery. However, in our view, this is not enough given the urgency of the salmon crisis on the Miramichi.

The Atlantic Salmon Federation recommends that DFO immediately establish an upper stock reference point for striped bass and a management target for the benefit of the broader native ecosystem. The primary mechanism for controlling the striped bass population should be Eel Ground's commercial fishery. It provides an economic opportunity while helping achieve management targets. DFO should eliminate the slot size altogether in Eel Ground's commercial fishery, eliminate the upper slot size for the recreational fishery and allow any bass in inland waters to be retained as a precautionary measure to help salmon.

In conclusion, I ask that you consider what's at stake. The Miramichi alone supports important indigenous food fisheries, as well as a recreational salmon fishery valued at \$20 million that supports more than 600 full-time equivalent jobs.

Yes, Atlantic salmon on the Miramichi face a lot of challenges. We know that. Salmon populations throughout the north Atlantic face challenges, but predation by striped bass is by far the biggest threat right now. There are general declines, but if you look at the Miramichi compared with the Restigouche and Gaspé rivers, the north shore rivers or the Labrador and Newfoundland rivers, there is a general decline, but nowhere is that decline more pronounced than on the Miramichi.

We may not be able to do anything about climate change and some of the problems of the north Atlantic, but on the issue of striped bass in home waters, right in our backyard, we can do something about it.

Thank you.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Taylor.

We'll now go to Chief Ginnish from the Eel Ground First Nation for seven minutes or less, please.

**Chief George Ginnish (Chief Executive Officer, North Shore Mi'gmaq District Council, Eel Ground First Nation):** Thank you. Good afternoon. I appreciate the opportunity to present to you all today.

This striped bass explosion has had a massive impact on my community for the past number of years. When Mr. Taylor was speaking about a six-and-a-half mile stretch where these fish land every spring, it's right in front of my community.

I have to give you a little background so you understand how this impacts our community economically.

Natoaganeg is a community of 600 people. They depend on the programming that we provide, and opportunities. Our median after-tax household income is \$25,000. You go a few miles down the road to Miramichi, and that doubles to \$51,000. Our unemployment rate is 21%, and that's of those who are still looking for work and haven't given up entirely.

We participated in the "First Nations Food, Nutrition and Environment Study" two years ago with the University of Ottawa. It shows that the lack of access to nutritional foods is causing great health issues for our first nations people.

The volume of food that we're able to access for them is the equivalent to one tablespoon per day when we look at all the moose

and fish we're able to access as a community. That's what it works out to: one tablespoon a day. We have diabetes, heart disease, and so many other things that I'm not going to be able to cover in seven minutes.

The Miramichi has a great history and reputation for a sport fishery. Our community has been excluded from much of that, and continues to be. When the striped bass populations dropped, the department asked us to voluntarily halt our salmon food fishery until the striped bass spawning could happen. For three of the most productive weeks, for a number of years, we did not put our traps in to feed our communities.

The drop in the bass population also put a complete halt on millions of dollars of investment that was occurring through the Marshall decision agreements. The community built a lodge that was meant to be sustained by infrastructure scheduled to be built for a recreational fishery. We were to build a wharf. All of that stopped when that bass was listed.

You have heard about the explosion of striped bass from DFO's perspective, from Mr. Taylor. You will hear it from the MSA and the watershed committee. We used to be able to count on salmon as a food source for our community. Over the past couple of years, there have been very few salmon. The few that we get, we share with our elders, because the numbers are barely a hundred.

We have agreements that allow us to catch up to 2,000 salmon. There aren't 2,000 to catch. Our fishers voluntarily removed their gillnets from the Miramichi last year because the numbers were so poor.

We have been telling DFO for years that they need a better process. They need to consult with the people on the river. This impacts our lives. We've been asking for funding for an indigenous knowledge study. That needs to be part of this process.

They need to relook at the way they do this. They make these decisions in isolation. They are not consulting with us when they decide how this process is going to work. There may be meetings once a year, but the season is gone, and it's another year with less opportunity for food.

We've been asking for a diversified food and commercial fishery for our people to help us combat these economic ills that the Marshall decision was supposed to help us with: a moderate livelihood, commercial access. If you go back to the 2012 census, five of the poorest postal codes in Canada are Mi'gmaq first nations in northern New Brunswick. Why this did not factor into the decision-making process is beyond me.

● (1650)

The bass were allowed to explode. The numbers were massive, and still we were denied commercial access that could have helped our community. It has only been over the past three years that we've actually been allowed 2,000 fish to retain for food. Up to that point, it was 200 fish a year in bycatch, even when there were hundreds of thousands of bass in the river. What type of process is that?

We've made these presentations to minister after minister, government after government. They fall off the table and we find ourselves right back where we were.

I had the opportunity to present to the Senate in December. We shared these exact concerns with them as well. Also, at MP Finnigan's request, we presented at the standing committee on salmon. There were some recommendations there. Good recommendations haven't been implemented. Why not?

We met with the Premier of New Brunswick last week. We had the opportunity to meet with him and we told him that we want to be part of the recovery of salmon on the Miramichi. The people on the Miramichi need to be part of that. Going forward, that has to be the way. We told him, "Listen, we are rights holders; you need to consult us." The consultation has been sketchy, very sketchy. We've been trying for a number of years.

In New Brunswick, we have a trilateral treaty implementation table. That process has been ongoing for 12 years, and DFO has just come to the table within the last couple of years. We're very frustrated with the approach. It seems to be, "Let's drag this out; let's delay it; let's not really deal with the concerns of the people whose livelihood is that river."

We have 40% food insecurity in my community. When you see the anecdotal and the scientific evidence of what the bass are doing to the salmon, which have been our cultural connection to that river and our food for so long, it angers me, but anger is not going to solve this. At some point, common sense has to step in and say, "Come on!"

• (1655)

**Mr. Robert Sopuck:** Yes.

**Chief George Ginnish:** We shared this with the premier and we will share it with DFO: There needs to be an investment in the river, and the people on the river have to be part of that process. They cannot figure this out in isolation. They've been dealing with the bass for 20 years.

From an anecdotal point of view, we'd say, "Yes, you're darn right it has impacted the salmon." Our elders cannot enjoy that fish. Because there are so few, we're scared to take them.

I thank you very much. I'm a little all over the page in what the presentation was supposed to be, but it's hard not to get worked up when I think about the people back home and how this impacts their lives.

On the bass recovery, my final statement is that it happened on the backs of our food fishery. It happened right in our backyard, and we still struggle with being able to provide for our people. Being aboriginal treaty rights holders, we should have access to that food and to other, so that we can look after our people.

Thank you.

*Wela'liog.*

**The Chair:** Thank you, Chief Ginnish. You may have been all over the page, but your points were certainly heard loud and clear.

I'll go now to Mr. Hambrook from the Miramichi Salmon Association, for seven minutes or less, please.

**Mr. Mark Hambrook (President, Miramichi Salmon Association Inc.):** Thank you very much for allowing us to make a

presentation here today. I'm not going to take very long because I agree with every word that Bill Taylor and Chief Ginnish said.

We absolutely concur with the recommendations that Mr. Taylor suggested.

The Miramichi Salmon Association is a river organization. We've been around for 66 years, and we have support from contributors from the United States and Canada. We took over the former federal fish hatchery. We operate it today, and we participate in science activities like the smolt tracking program that Mr. Taylor referred to. We were partners in that.

We just find that the striped bass population is too high. Yes, there are ecosystem changes occurring, but this, to me, was a simple, straightforward problem. We were killing all bass that came into the river by allowing them to be caught in the gaspereau nets with no limits. As soon as they stopped that, the population took off. It took a few years because it was down so low, but once the striped bass kept spawning and spawning again, that population took off. Unchecked, it continues to grow. It would be very easy to bring it back in balance. If it gets down a little too much, we can shut it down and it will grow again. We know that it will.

My big concern is with the population in 2017. Prospecting in Labrador is actually creating an invasive species in that province. You know, by letting that population get too large, we are creating a problem. We have invasive species legislation, but letting that population get too large is creating an invasive species for other places. Prospecting? We don't want that. We want these fish to be in balance and to stay where they belong.

It is a great industry. It is a great recreational fish. We'd like to see a strong striped bass population on the Miramichi, but it has just gone too far. We need to get it back to a balanced situation. There are enough fish for a proper harvest—a commercial harvest and a recreational harvest. It's a success story, but you just can't stop. You can't let it get out of hand. It has to be balanced.

That's my statement. Thank you.

• (1700)

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Hambrook.

Now we'll go to Ms. Norton for seven minutes or less, please.

**Ms. Deborah Norton (President, Miramichi Watershed Management Committee Inc.):** Thank you.

I too agree with everything that's already been said, so I'm going to carry on from there.

I carry a bit of a different torch, because I'm president of the Miramichi Watershed Management Committee, and we're not a conservation group. We are a group of stakeholders looking to utilize the resources and create as much economics from the Miramichi River as possible. We are not there to pick one species over another, but we definitely want our river to be in equilibrium. We want all of the species that are native to the river in equilibrium.

I would say that we are fortunate in the Miramichi Watershed Management Committee, because we have a memorandum of understanding with DFO and our energy resource development department in the provincial government to co-manage the Miramichi watershed. I would look to our having a bigger voice at that table and getting more done there.

The four species that we look to utilize for economic development are salmon, trout, shad and striped bass. The striped bass is a wonderful fish and wonderful species. We just don't want a kazillion of them and two of something else. I'm not telling you anything you don't already know. You know that the population crashed. It went down as a result of the bycatch—that's my opinion as well—and then there was a wonderful good news story. Wow. It rebounded.

When it rebounded, we, the people on the Miramichi, wanted to go fishing. We wanted to fish for these hundreds of thousands of fish we were seeing in front of our noses. It was a wild time. There were a lot of town hall meetings and we had DFO resources from the gulf region come to these meetings—not the two gentlemen who spoke here; it was before their time—to try to explain the management of the resource to us. We actually had one individual stand up and tell us that perhaps the job of DFO was to see how high they could raise the population of striped bass. In my opinion, that's not managing a species.

You know what happened. As somebody said, they went prospecting. They went on a walkabout. They went to the Strait of Belle Isle and up to Labrador. I don't know how many thousands or hundreds of thousands didn't come back, but they didn't come back. Why did they go there?

I forgot to tell you. I'm not just from the Miramichi. I live on the Miramichi River. It's the last thing I see at night and the first thing I see in the morning, so my eyes have a pretty good idea of what's happening in the river. A smolt wheel catches everything that comes down. We're using them to count baby salmon and get an estimate of the population, but everything else goes into that smolt wheel too. Three years ago it was impossible to put that wheel down at night without standing there and bailing smelt out of it all night long. Sometimes two men were not able to do that, so we would have to stop fishing it. I was saying earlier how many smelt we caught in three wheels last year. We caught a grand total of 15.

The striped bass is not a bad fish. It just has to eat. It's like us, so it has to eat, and it has. It's eaten everything. It's eaten all of our forage fish. We have no smelt left. We have no gaspereau left. It's eaten everything, so people ask how many striped bass we should have in the Miramichi. I'm not a biologist. I don't know, but it would appear to me that 300,000, as Bill pointed out, is 10 times more than the lower reference point. Maybe that would be a good upper reference point. We sure have to get that upper reference point developed, and we have to start managing around it.

That's all I have to say.

•(1705)

**The Chair:** Thank you. We saved a bit of time on that one.

I'll go now to the New Brunswick Salmon Council. Mr. Pugh and Mr. Bagnall, can you hear us?

**Mr. John Pugh (President, New Brunswick Salmon Council):** Yes, we can.

**The Chair:** Okay, you're up for seven minutes or less between you.

**Mr. John Pugh:** It's John Pugh speaking here. We're not going to take our seven minutes. We want to give the committee as much time as we can for them to ask questions. Very briefly, the New Brunswick Salmon Council is composed of 26 affiliates, some of which are in the room with you today. We participate in smolt tracking and we work closely with the organizations. We also sit on the board of the Atlantic Salmon Federation.

We are in complete agreement with everything that's been said thus far. The striped bass certainly are out of balance. From a recreational fisheries perspective, we've heard from some presentations on this matter at an earlier date that this is a great fishery. We don't feel that this meets the definition of a great fishery. It's certainly well beyond the expectation of people who participate in a striped bass fishery from the New England region and up and down the coast of the United States.

Being able to boat 100 fish plus per day is nonsensical for a recreational striped bass fishery. As Debbie said, the striped bass certainly are out of any form of ecological equilibrium, to the detriment of not only salmon and salmon smolts but also other species that utilize the Miramichi system, particularly smelt, which the spring kelts rely on for reconditioning. The striped bass are doing a number on those, as well as the gaspereaux.

I will turn it over to John Bagnall.

John, do you have anything to add to that?

**Mr. John Bagnall (Chair, Fisheries Committee, New Brunswick Salmon Council):** Thanks, John, and no, not really. I agree with everybody who spoke: Bill, Debbie, Chief Ginnish and Mark.

I think the priority should be getting an upper stock limit for bass. From what we see in interpreting the numbers from DFO, I think that probably a number south of 100,000 striped bass spawners would be appropriate, and 300,000 is far too many. We did an analysis. As you know, we prepared a written submission that interpreted a bunch of data from DFO and ASF, and it shows with little doubt that the striped bass are having a major effect on salmon smolt survival through Miramichi Bay.

The numbers we see are that only 66% mortality on average is through Miramichi Bay in recent years, whereas before it was less than half of that. When you have half as many fish going out, you're going to get half as many fish coming back, everything else being equal.

Again, I think the upper stock limit should be less than 100,000 striped bass. DFO can do wonders with stock recruitment models. I think that probably they can adapt and manage and make sure the population is sustained at that. That way, we can have two good fisheries. We could have good salmon fisheries, and we could have good striped bass fisheries.

Thank you very much.

**The Chair:** Thank you, gentlemen. That was a little less than seven minutes, as you said.

We'll go now to the questioning round. I'll remind the questioners to please try to identify who the question is for in order to make it a little easier and save a bit of your questioning time, especially for the two gentlemen who are here by phone.

Now, on the government side, we have Mr. Finnigan, for seven minutes or less, please.

• (1710)

**Mr. Pat Finnigan:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thanks to everyone for being here today. I'm very familiar with all of you, and I'm happy to see that you're here to give your views on how we can best manage the bass. I'm going to start with Debbie.

I'm sorry. I call you Debbie all the time. I'm sure you're okay with that?

**Ms. Deborah Norton:** That's my name.

**Mr. Pat Finnigan:** "Ms. Norton" doesn't really fit with me.

You also run a business. You have a sports lodge. You bring people in to fish salmon and to do other fishing. It's important for you that we keep that balance on the river, that we keep that equilibrium within the river and the ecosystem. You kept referencing that upper reference number, I guess, and asking, "Where is it?" It's still tough to get. We just heard somebody saying that it should be below 100,000. Some are saying that it should be at least 300,000. If you talk to the people at the Striper Cup, you hear that we should not touch this number at all, that it's just where it should be.

Where do you think we should be as far as the number is concerned? I guess that's my question. Do you think DFO can be fast enough on their feet to manage from one season to another? We heard this year that probably a lot of spawners died in the cold rivers. Can we react fast enough to keep that equilibrium or should we just stay out of it? I will ask you what your thoughts are on that.

**Ms. Deborah Norton:** I have no idea if they can react fast enough, Pat. I would hope they can. That's their job: to manage the fishery. So, yes, get out there and set that upper reference point and manage the fishery.

In terms of what it should be, I'm not the biologist. I want everything in equilibrium from the watershed point of view, including striped bass, because anyone who does know me knows that I bought a very expensive new striped bass boat. We have a great striped bass fishery, and people on the Miramichi love fishing striped bass, just as they love salmon, but we can't have one species destroying everything else. As I said, it's not because they're bad. They're not bad fish. They just have to eat, and they've eaten everything. They've eaten our smelt. They've eaten our gaspereaux.

They're eating everything. So set that upper limit, manage around it, and let's get the job done.

**Mr. Pat Finnigan:** Okay. Thank you, Debbie.

Mark, do you think with that number—and some people would like to see the total eradication of striped bass—we still need to protect the spawning grounds or the stretch of the river where they do spawn in the northwest? Do you think it's important that we still protect that even though we want to get the numbers down? Do you think it's important that we find other measures, but not necessarily when they're spawning?

**Mr. Mark Hambrook:** Back when the numbers were very low, we fully supported all of the measures that were being contemplated at the time. We had to get this population rebuilt. There were a lot of unknowns at the time. Stopping the commercial fishery—would that do it? It really did, but we brought it back without closing angling for any species in that spawning area. People were still allowed to fish for salmon and trout during the spawning time the bass were there. So I find it ironic that when the population gets up to 300,000 plus that now we decide to even close the spawning grounds to all angling. It just doesn't make sense. Do I support that? Absolutely. If that population's going down and it needs some extra help, close the angling. I fully support that, but not at this stage; it just doesn't make sense.

**Mr. Pat Finnigan:** Okay. Thank you.

Chief Ginnish, we often hear—and I think you mentioned it—that traditional knowledge is often ignored, and yet you've been on that river for thousands of years. I'm sure there were probably some ups and downs in that time. Would you say that the precautionary approach that DFO seems to have taken was the right thing or would you say that they have mismanaged that? At the same time, if they had consulted, would you have taken a different approach maybe sooner? Do you think we can be fast enough to manage it?

**Chief George Ginnish:** I'm not the expert on a precautionary approach, but it would seem that when you have one species, the salmon, that is in crisis and another one that, even by a conservative estimate, is 10 times over the number needed to survive, the decisions that need to be taken are not being taken in a timely manner. We would say that absolutely traditional knowledge is a requirement of management. We've been preaching co-management to DFO for many years. We're always promised to be part of that decision-making process. That hasn't happened, Pat, MP Finnigan.

• (1715)

**Mr. Pat Finnigan:** That's fine.

**Chief George Ginnish:** We're at the point now where we're demanding it. You have to have that traditional knowledge. We have expertise in our community, which has fished the rivers for as long as the MSA has been on the river as well. Why would you ignore that local knowledge in setting a plan? I have great trouble understanding how year after year we could be told when we are so dependent on the river as a primary food access, "No, we just need another year. We just need another year". It was supposed to be a five-year plan initially, and look what the numbers exploded to. How can you justify that as a proper management process for any species? As I said, we get one tablespoon of traditional food per member daily. There are 300,000 to 600,000 bass in the river right next to our community, and up to two years ago we were allowed a bycatch of only 200 fish. That's unreal.

**Mr. Pat Finnigan:** That's not enough, okay.

**The Chair:** I'm sorry, Mr. Finnigan. Your seven minutes are up.

Now we move to the Conservative side.

Mr. Arnold, you have seven minutes or less, please.

**Mr. Mel Arnold (North Okanagan—Shuswap, CPC):** I'll probably share my time with my colleagues, but I want to question the people who are here right now.

It sounds like most of you have been on the river for a long time. Have the water conditions changed from what they were 50 years ago?

Ms. Norton.

**Ms. Deborah Norton:** Yes, we've had some really warm summers. You heard earlier that we have consultations, and we went to those consultations this year. Although last year was a terrible year, to my surprise I found out that 1954 was even worse. Are things warming up, and do we have global warming? I'm sure we do, but I'm not sure it's to the extent that's being touted.

That's just what I see on the river.

**Mr. Mel Arnold:** Okay.

Does anybody else care to chime in as to whether it's water conditions or temperatures that have attracted the striped bass versus the salmon? Are these species moving north?

Mr. Ginnish.

**Chief George Ginnish:** I think that when the weather is.... We have had periods over the last number of years where when it was warm—I mean the salmon—and we need to pretty much reduce the effort and protect them. Part of the work that we're trying to do with DFO is.... We've called for more deepwater refuge for the fish. We've talked with the Province of New Brunswick about its forest practices and retaining buffer zones to prevent runoff, to keep the streams and the rivers cooler. That's really important. With regard to those decisions, one in itself may not be a critical factor, but when you add in the effect that the seals have, that the offshore, the commercial bycatch and the green life have, all of these things are just conspiring to make life exceptionally difficult for the salmon. However, the warmer weather seems to be fantastic for striped bass. They've really....

**Mr. Mel Arnold:** Okay, if I can move on to another line here.

It seems from what we're hearing that the easiest decision for DFO or the administration to make is to restrict anglers rather than take other measures to address an underpopulation or an overpopulation of a species. Is that an oversimplification, or do you see that happening: where anglers are the first and sometimes the only ones affected by the decisions rather than addressing the seal populations, predator populations or, as you mentioned, forest practices?

Who would like to...?

• (1720)

**Mr. Bill Taylor:** I can take a stab at that, Mr. Arnold. Thank you.

With regard to restricting anglers, I think you're speaking of Atlantic salmon conservation and of taking measures to protect and hopefully restore Atlantic salmon. That's the low-hanging fruit.

**Mr. Mel Arnold:** While also restricting bass anglers.

**Mr. Bill Taylor:** Well, perhaps as well. However, the impacts on Atlantic salmon are many. Striped bass are front and centre on the Miramichi. All of the research would demonstrate causation when you look at the comparison between the smolt tracking work on the Miramichi and what's happened on the Restigouche and Grand Caspédia. That's peer-reviewed. That's been done between the Atlantic Salmon Federation and DFO.

As far as the striped bass is concerned, I would say the commercial fishery, so restricting fisheries, whether it's anglers or the commercial fishery.... I would say that the quickest and most beneficial action toward bringing some equilibrium or balance back to the Miramichi ecosystem and having a healthy striped bass population and healthy salmon population would be to enable a successful Eel Ground First Nation commercial fishery.

**Mr. Mel Arnold:** Okay. Thank you.

There's a question that my colleague wanted to know the answer to and that piqued my interest as well. The DFO officials who were here earlier identified that most of these bass spawned in the Miramichi. It didn't sound like they'd identified anywhere else where the bass spawned, but they talked about migration to the estuaries and so on.

From the tagging, are you aware that they've moved into any of the other rivers, or are they solely focused on the Miramichi—and what might be the reason for that?

Mr. Hambrook, it looks like you have an answer.

**Mr. Mark Hambrook:** When the population was lower, all of the striped bass spawned on the northwest Miramichi, or that was what the evidence was. However, historically, they had spawned in other rivers and there was evidence that they did. Last year, between our watershed committee and the MSA, we did a survey and found successful spawning on the southwest Miramichi. We found eggs. We found larvae. We documented it and presented the data to DFO, so it's not only the northwest Miramichi. We proved that it's on the southwest Miramichi too.

It's long overdue, but now that the population is so high, the work now is to check all of the other rivers to see if there is successful spawning in them. Sometimes you see fish spawning but it may not be successful.

**Mr. Mel Arnold:** Right.

**Mr. Mark Hambrook:** You need to track whether there are larvae and young there, so we're doing it again this summer and expanding. Now I find out DFO's doing it. So I don't know exactly who's going to be doing what. But anyway, we need to find out if they're spawning in other places, because under the the COSEWIC, one spawning location still keeps a species a special concern. If we have more than one spawning area, then it's off the COSEWIC danger list.

**Mr. Mel Arnold:** Robert, do I have one minute?

**Mr. Robert Sopuck:** Really quickly, Mr. Hambrook, I want to ask about the smallmouth bass. I know it's not related to the striped bass, but we're talking about the future of salmon here. What's going to happen to the salmon on the Miramichi if the smallmouth bass are not eradicated and escape into the Miramichi?

**Mr. Mark Hambrook:** DFO commissioned a report and if the smallmouth bass establish themselves in the southwest Miramichi, we're going to see a dramatic reduction in parr production because they both like the same habitats and they will be a ferocious predator of the Atlantic salmon. Will they get up into some of these very cold water tributaries? Perhaps not. Maybe there will still be some sanctuaries for salmon, but it's going to dramatically impact the Atlantic salmon on the Miramichi.

**Mr. Robert Sopuck:** So there will be smallmouth bass on one end and stripers at the other.

**Mr. Mark Hambrook:** That's right, with the salmon in-between.

**Mr. Robert Sopuck:** It's a bad combination.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Sopuck.

Mr. Johns, you have seven minutes or less, please.

**Mr. Gord Johns:** Thank you all for your important testimony.

It's great to see you all again after we visited a couple of years ago and the warm welcome you gave us when we were out there to study the decline of the Atlantic salmon and the Atlantic cod.

I'll start with Chief Ginnish. You talked about consultation. Where I live we're having the same issue. You probably heard about the court case the Nuu-Chah-Nulth have been in for the last 12 years. The government spent \$19 million fighting them in court for rights that we know are protected under the charter and the Constitution.

With the challenges you face as a community right on the water, being unable to access economic opportunities and being challenged by high unemployment and food insecurity and diabetes and the various challenges that come with that, do you believe that DFO has consulted you adequately? We had them here to testify. I asked them specifically if they had consulted the nation around the process and around the striped bass. Do you believe that was adequate consultation or would you say that DFO conferred with the nation?

• (1725)

**Chief George Ginnish:** Meaningful consultation is definitely different from "this is the way it is". It has to be a two-way thing to be meaningful. Quite frankly, I'd have to say no, because here we are

20 years later and our asks are not being dealt with in a timely fashion.

Member Robert, I would just put on the record that Miramichi Lake needs \$1.5 million to purchase that [*Inaudible—Editor*] to do away with those smallmouth fish. That should be speeded up as much as possible, because—

**Mr. John Pugh:** Hear, hear!

**Chief George Ginnish:** —right now it's back and forth. Somebody needs to take that ball and run with it, and our tribal council's willing to do that, but it has to be funded and it's got to go through the hurdles so it can happen. That's beyond our ability.

**Mr. Gord Johns:** Was the 25,000 that DFO allocated for you both sides of the season dictated to you or was it discussed? Was it demonstrating the government's attitude that the relationship with indigenous people is the most important one and that free, prior and informed consent...?

**Chief George Ginnish:** We're not feeling the love.

**Mr. Gord Johns:** Okay.

**Chief George Ginnish:** I think the 25,000 DFO had mentioned was a number they had come to. We have a striped bass proposal for this year. We're supposed to do 25,000 in the fall and 25,000 in the spring, and we're asking for 50,000 right up front in the spring.

We've had two fall starts. The licence landed here in July last year after all the fish were gone and then in the fall Mother Nature decided that winter was going to come early so we were out there for three weeks. We didn't even make a dent in the fish.

**Mr. Gord Johns:** Chief Ginnish, can you speak to what 50,000 would do for your community in terms of the economy and food security for your nation?

**Chief George Ginnish:** Fifty thousand would be a commercial fishery. We feel it would be a sustainable fishery. It would be based on the numbers that are available and, hopefully, based on.... You could say that if all we need is 30,000 for the species to survive and there are 300,000 now, there shouldn't be any problem with our community fishing for 50,000 to support a community that's 40% food insecure and has over 20% unemployment.

**Mr. Gord Johns:** Right. And I think you've identified your commitment to conservation, by pulling your nets when you saw the numbers were low on the other side.

**Chief George Ginnish:** Yes.

**Mr. Gord Johns:** Like the Nuu-chah-nulth, they understand that protection of the species is a priority, obviously, but they also want to share the economic prosperity when the opportunity comes along.

**Chief George Ginnish:** If we don't look after conservation and long-term sustainability, we'll all pay the price.

**Mr. Gord Johns:** That's right.

Ms. Norton, I really enjoyed visiting your place on the river a couple of years ago. You talked about the economic impact for the recreation and sport fish industry. There were 13 recommendations that came out of the report, I believe. Perhaps you could speak about what's happened since with implementing the recommendations since we were there and the impact on the economy, or potential for the economy, for recreational and sport fishers and how this might be relative to today's conversation.

**Ms. Deborah Norton:** I may be amiss in my information, but to my knowledge none of the recommendations have gone anywhere. As far as economic benefits are concerned, Bill already spoke to the fact there are hundreds and hundreds of jobs. The fishery is very important. It is our culture. It is our heritage. My roots don't go back that far. They only go back to 1823, of living on the bank of the river, but that's the same story that many people will tell you up and down the river. I have to tell you, people are scared to death. There are people who have earned their living doing nothing except guiding and outfitting, and they see their way of life disappearing before their eyes. They're scared to death because they're losing.

• (1730)

**Mr. Gord Johns:** What do you suggest? What are the next steps, Ms. Norton, that are the right steps forward?

**Ms. Deborah Norton:** Develop that upper reference point. Look to manage the watershed in equilibrium. Create environmental things that are going to help the river, like cold water, as Chief George suggested. Work with our provincial people and hopefully increase our buffer zones. There's no easy answer. It's everything.

**Mr. Gord Johns:** I agree.

I still have one minute, Mr. Chair? Is that correct?

**The Chair:** You have a little less.

**Mr. Gord Johns:** Okay. Mr. Taylor, just—

**Mr. John Bagnall:** Can I say something?

**Mr. Gord Johns:** Just one second. I'm going to ask Mr. Taylor a quick question.

You talked about DFO in action. Can you speak a bit more about that?

**Mr. Bill Taylor:** It would take a long time to cover the watershed. But all joking aside, I think there were actually 19 recommendations

**Mr. Gord Johns:** Right.

**Mr. Bill Taylor:** —by the standing committee that were outstanding, and the ministerial advisory committee before that, which I co-chaired...

There has been some action on some of the recommendations, but far too few. There are two recommendations specific to the striped bass fishery, which is what this committee is looking at right now. What we need is that upper stock reference point. I would suggest that the recovery target the DFO set of 31,200 is your bottom. That's the floor. It's somewhere between that and the 300,000 that we see today. For the 333,000 that we talk about—the steep decline from a million to 333,000 spawners—that's the spawning-sized striped bass. That's the second-highest on record.

I think that's enough said.

**Mr. Gord Johns:** Thank you.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Johns. I know we've gone to the point that we had allocated time-wise for this, but I think in our next hour we to deal with drafting instructions. We probably have time to do a five-minute round, if everyone is in agreement, for questions. I would remind people that there are a couple of guests on the telephone who a couple of times have tried to get in, but the questioner didn't really hear or recognize them, so keep that in mind.

We'll go to the government side now for five minutes or less. Mr. Hardie.

**Mr. Ken Hardie (Fleetwood—Port Kells, Lib.):** No, I wouldn't have any questions on this one. I'm sorry, sir.

**The Chair:** Somebody said you did.

Oh, Mr. Arseneault. When you're ready, please, you have five minutes or less.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. René Arseneault (Madawaska—Restigouche, Lib.):** Thank you very much.

I come from New Brunswick and I live in the village of Charlo, next to Chaleur Bay, at the head of the Restigouche River. We are concerned, and my friend Pat Finnigan has been telling me about the striped bass issue in the Miramichi River for a long time. This is of great interest to me for reasons of culture and heritage, and we are also concerned, back home in the Restigouche area, about the salmon fishery.

The figures I hear about the striped bass worry me a lot. The striped bass, which was not present in the waterways around the northwest of Chaleur Bay, is now present in those waters. You can fish them every summer, with both feet on the shore, simply by pulling on your fishing rod. The striped bass is voracious. One of my friends caught a big one last summer. In its stomach, there were six small lobsters of about six inches each, still intact. And yet even though it had these four lobsters in its stomach, the bass took the bait to try and eat more.

My first question is for Mr. Taylor. Are we sure that the striped bass spawning grounds are limited to the Miramichi River? Is there some way we can be sure of that?

Perhaps Mr. Hambrook could also answer that question.

[*English*]

**Mr. Bill Taylor:** I can answer that question, and Mr. Hambrook can chime in if I get something a little wrong.

You are correct. The only known spawning location as of today is the northwest Miramichi, but as Mr. Hambrook mentioned earlier, the Miramichi Salmon Association and the Miramichi Watershed Management Committee have done surveys in other areas and there has been confirmed spawning in the main southwest Miramichi.

You're absolutely right. I know a lot of camp owners and supporters of the Atlantic Salmon Federation who angle Atlantic salmon on the Restigouche. Over the past several years now, quite a number of striped bass have been caught in the Restigouche during salmon season, while people are fishing for salmon. In some cases, the striped bass have been cut open, and in some cases, there have been several salmon par or brook trout. We work very closely with David LeBlanc of the Restigouche Watershed Management Committee.

We're hearing that from all rivers. Along the north shore of Quebec, in the Godbout and Moisie rivers, the striped bass are there. When they are caught by anglers, they are opened up and there are numerous par in the stomach contents.

Going back to the prospecting in Labrador, I would suggest that those striped bass that were going up through the Strait of Belle Isle in northern Newfoundland and the north shore of Quebec and Labrador weren't just going there for exercise. They were looking for food, and they're running up rivers and eating salmon par in a lot of rivers along the coast.

• (1735)

[Translation]

**Mr. René Arseneault:** What concerns me a great deal is that as in most rivers that connect to Chaleur Bay, the salmon stock in the Restigouche River has declined significantly. This drop may not be as serious as in the Miramichi, because of the striped bass, but I can assure you that the citizens in the Restigouche area are in panic mode. The stocks have collapsed. I am very concerned by your testimony.

Will reducing the striped bass stocks in the Miramichi River allow the salmon stocks to recover? Elsewhere, without the striped bass, the stocks are declining precipitously.

Ms. Norton, would you care to answer that question?

[English]

**Ms. Deborah Norton:** I don't know what the question was.

**Mr. René Arseneault:** The question is this: Knowing that the striped bass is in the Miramichi River right now and not elsewhere, yet the stock diminished everywhere else, in all the salmon rivers that touch the Bay of Chaleur and the Restigouche and Bonaventure Rivers, etc., are we sure that decreasing the stock of the striped bass will increase the number of salmon in the Miramichi River?

**Ms. Deborah Norton:** They eat. Like I said, they're not bad fish; they're hungry fish. If there's not as many of them there that need to be fed, then we're not going to lose as many salmon smolt, gaspereau, smelt and so on.

In the Restigouche, I believe the issue is going to come to the fact that after the fish spawn, they leave and go back to their native river and are finding their way to the Restigouche in the summer. What do you suppose they're going to eat? In my opinion, it would be par because that's what's there, your par and your trout. I believe that you're going to start seeing reductions in your numbers on the Restigouche as a result of these fish as well.

**Mr. René Arseneault:** Yes, but there are already very low stocks in the Restigouche River right now.

**Ms. Deborah Norton:** Yes, and they're going to get lower.

**Mr. René Arseneault:** Worse.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Arseneault. Your five minutes has expired.

Now to the Conservative side, Mr. Sopuck, for five minutes or less, please.

**Mr. Robert Sopuck:** Thank you for the compliment, Mr. Taylor, on our wild Atlantic salmon report that was unanimously adopted by this committee.

In your view, if that report's recommendations were adopted essentially word for word, is that the blueprint for the recovery of Atlantic salmon?

**Mr. Bill Taylor:** The quick answer is yes.

I would add that I'm also not so naive as to think that would solve all of the salmon problems. There are factors at play over which we have little or no control, but we can't use that as an excuse for doing nothing.

If the Department of Fisheries and Oceans had the resources and the will to implement all 19 recommendations, that would go a long way to at least slowing the salmon's decline and hopefully beginning the recovery process.

**Mr. Robert Sopuck:** In terms of resources, I very much have a different view. They have enough resources; they're just not being deployed correctly, and I'll stand by that.

Mr. Hambrook, we talked a while ago about the projects that you did under the recreational fisheries conservation partnerships program. I would note that this government has cancelled the partnerships program, even though this committee unanimously recommended that it continue.

Can you talk about the cold water refugia project that you do? I think that's extremely interesting, and it shows—to be a little maudlin about it—the gentle hand of human beings helping a species in difficulty.

Can you describe that project?

**Mr. Mark Hambrook:** We recognize that we get some warm summers, and it's been well demonstrated that water temperatures get to lethal temperatures for salmon. During that period of time, salmon have to find cold water sources or they'll die. They move to the springs and the colder brooks that are coming in to the Miramichi. The water is so shallow at the mouth of these brooks that they go into these areas and then they're picked off by eagles and osprey and other predators.

What we've tried to do is to identify cold water areas and dig out the mouth of the brooks into the river so that we have deeper water where fish can find refuge, deeper water with boulders that they can hide behind. We feel that this can save a lot of fish. You can put a lot of fish into these pools for a very short period of time until the temperature cools off again.

Under that recreational fisheries program, the federal government would provide up to 50% of the cost of doing it. We have been doing one, two, three brooks a year for the last number of years. We think it's made quite a difference on the river and we want to continue to do more.

Last year was the first year that we didn't have access to that fund. We still went ahead and did one, but it really tapped into our resources to be able to fund the whole thing. That help from the federal government was good.

• (1740)

**Mr. Robert Sopuck:** Thank you, Mr. Hambrook.

I'd like to bring in our two gentlemen on the phone, if I might.

When I look at the minister's letter in response to the wild Atlantic salmon report, and listening to DFO officials both here and at other meetings, there seems to be an endless request for more studies, more resources, then more studies, and very few action items.

Is that just my impression—again, to the two gentlemen on the phone—or is that something that you believe as well?

**Mr. John Pugh:** Look, I go to these meetings. I attend them. As Chief Ginnish said, it's like we're talking but sometimes no one is listening.

I attend both the Maritimes and the gulf region meetings, and the questions I ask are, "We seem to have a problem here with the decline of wild Atlantic salmon. What's the plan? What are we going to do? What action is DFO taking?" We're there, and I think we're all demonstrating that we're willing participants, ready to step up and roll up our sleeves and get engaged and work with DFO, but there's no plan. And if there is one, it hasn't been shared with me.

I've seen the plan that the committee has. As Bill said, it was well done and excellent, but the rubber needs to hit the road eventually. I don't see it, and I don't think that the organizations at the table today see it.

I'll give John an opportunity to chime in there.

**Mr. John Bagnall:** I agree, John. I think DFO is very good at science, but not that good at getting that science into action through management. For example, the smolt-to-adult supplementation program was funded by the federal government, and it hit walls. Nothing was done. I think once we get the striped bass population under control, fewer than 100,000 spawners, we could jump-start the salmon population with a generation of smolt-to-adult supplementation.

The program's undergone a peer review, but it's being blocked by DFO. The peer review was positive, so I really don't understand why they couldn't be doing something like that.

**Mr. Robert Sopuck:** Thank you very much.

**The Chair:** We'll now go to the NDP and Mr. Johns, for five minutes or fewer, please.

**Mr. Gord Johns:** I think really what I'm hearing is that the government says they're listening to local knowledge; they're letting local knowledge guide their decision-making when it comes to fisheries management.

I'm from the west coast. Just two days ago the minister wrote an op-ed about herring on the west coast. It's about British Columbia, but it should be related to all fisheries. He said:

British Columbians expect science-based decision-making to inform our fisheries management. Our government is investing in science so that we can leverage new research, and refine and improve our approach to fisheries management. Through consultation, we continue to meet with Indigenous groups, fish harvesters and the public almost every day to better understand their perspectives.

Do you believe this is happening? Do you believe they're consulting you in a meaningful way? If not, what do you suggest would be best practices in moving forward?

I'll open it up, because where I come from, the meaningful part isn't there. The true consultation isn't there. In terms of the indigenous and local knowledge they say is the fundamental principle guiding fisheries-related decisions, we don't find it's there. It's often directives from Ottawa, and often under-resourced. We don't see enough boots on the ground, certainly where I come from.

Sorry, Ms. Norton, you wanted to speak to that.

• (1745)

**Ms. Deborah Norton:** There is a meeting that everybody goes to. There are probably 30 people around the table. There's no way you can say that's consultation. We all have three minutes—less time than here—so if we're going to get ideas out and are going to co-manage our watersheds, we have to have more time at the table to talk about them together.

I definitely want to add—and it scares me right to death—that we're talking about managing fisheries right now, and closing a river to fishing is not managing the resource. All we have to do is look to the mighty Saint John River that's been closed for 25-plus years. It will probably never open again, and there isn't one more fish in it now than there was when they closed it. So for heaven's sake, don't contemplate closing our river and thinking that's going to bring the salmon back.

**Mr. Gord Johns:** Thank you.

Yes, Chief Ginnish.

**Chief George Ginnish:** We've been at a treaty implementation table for a number of years. We're working on a number of items. We have DFO at the table, and based on the discussions we've had, our feeling is that they aren't ready to negotiate a rights-based agreement with us. Marshall is still providing interim access to our communities. That is huge in that it may not be a river-management thing, but it's certainly a reconciliation. It's an economy-building thing for our communities that needs to happen. In order for that to happen, it has to be at that treaty implementation table, and it's not.

I have to be honest; it isn't going where we thought it would go.

**Mr. Gord Johns:** Does it feel empty-handed when they come to the table?

**Chief George Ginnish:** Well, there's a negotiator who's in Atlantic region now. He has another access agreement that's basically much along the lines of what the interim Marshall commercial access was. It's not meant to include the first nations in a full-blown process. It's "Here, we'll buy some licences and give them to you, and that should satisfy your treaty rights." It doesn't.

**Mr. Gord Johns:** No kidding. Thank you for that.

The person on the phone wanted to comment.

**Mr. John Pugh:** No, go ahead, John.

**Mr. Gord Johns:** It's Gord Johns. No problem. You're welcome to add if you have anything.

In terms of best practices, does any of you want to add more in terms of recommendations? You have an opportunity here.

**Mr. Mark Hambrook:** I worked with Fisheries and Oceans for 18 years. While I was in Prince Edward Island, I used to meet with every local community fish and game club about once a week for at least a phone call. Today, now, I sit on the other side of the table. We have a recreational fisheries coordinator in the gulf region of Moncton, and maybe once every few months we might get a phone call.

If your job is to be a recreational fisheries coordinator and Atlantic salmon and striped bass are the biggest issues, Bill Taylor should be called, I should be called, and the rest of you people should be

called. You should be out there in a constant dialogue, and that just doesn't happen.

I think the community relations and getting into the core of the people is not what's happening. It used to be back when I worked there. We were out there every day talking to people, and that's not happening today.

• (1750)

**The Chair:** Thank you, Gord.

**Mr. John Bagnall:** The New Brunswick Salmon Council has a proposal out to develop a fisheries liaison committee that might fit under that, including government and stakeholders. We can send you the details on that if you'd like.

**Mr. Gord Johns:** Yes.

**The Chair:** If you could, please do that.

We're out of time right now. Before we suspend to go in camera to deal with some drafting instructions, I would again like to thank our witnesses, John Pugh and John Bagnall, by telephone, and Mr. Taylor, Mr. Hambrook, Ms. Norton and Chief Ginnish. Thank you for appearing as witnesses today and for sharing your knowledge with the committee on this important topic.

We will suspend for a couple of minutes to get reorganized.

*[Proceedings continue in camera]*

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