

KENNEBEC JOURNAL

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OUR OPINION

Alewives, bass live in harmony; re-open St. Croix

Sportfishing guides still oppose lifting ban, despite scientific study that shows no impact

The eastern Maine hamlet of Grand Lake Stream, set among sparkling lakes deep in the emerald woods of the St. Croix River watershed, has long been at the center of a battle over two kinds of fish: alewives and bass.

The alewife is a native, sea-run fish that once spawned in nearby lakes; the bass is an introduced species brought to these lakes in the 19th century.

The alewife is considered by the area's sportfishermen to be a junk fish; the bass is a prized sportfishing species.

The alewife has no obvious economic value to the community; the bass sustains the community's struggling economy.

And, according to bass fishing guides in Grand Lake Stream, the alewife is a dangerous threat to the bass — and thus to their livelihoods.

At one time, the St. Croix River and its feeder lakes were home to one of the state's largest alewife populations, numbering 2.6 million fish in 1987. Those alewives spawned in the region's freshwaters, and then moved downstream through the St. Croix to the ocean, where they spent the majority of their lives. Along the way, alewives provided abundant food for myriad wildlife species and, once in the ocean, fed groundfish, seabirds and marine mammals as well.

Over the decades, the St. Croix alewife numbers declined with industrial pollution of the river and the construction of dams. But a joint federal-state restoration effort brought a resurgence of alewives and, more than 20 years ago, that resurgence coincided with a drastic decline of smallmouth bass in Spednic Lake, one of the lakes in the watershed.

Coincidence or some meant causation.

Bass fishermen and sportfishing guides were quick to blame the bass decline on alewives, despite a lack of scientific evidence and despite complicating factors that could have contributed to the loss of Spednic Lake's bass, such as heavy lake-level drawdowns as well as strong fishing pressure.

At the behest of the region's fishing guides, Maine lawmakers passed a bill in 1995 to bar alewives from the upper St. Croix River and its feeder lakes where they spawned. The bass, they declared, were too important to sacrifice. Lawmakers did this despite the opposition of the state's wildlife managers as well as the federal government. And since the St. Croix River forms the international boundary between Maine and New Brunswick, they did it over the protests of the Canadian government as well.

The mechanism of the bill was simple: it directed operators at two state-controlled dams on the lower part of the St. Croix River to insert extra wooden flashboards in their fish ladders to stop alewives from ascending past those dams.

For more than a decade, those flashboards have barred alewives from spawning in their natal ponds and in the process have accomplished an astonishing feat: They have driven the St. Croix alewife population from millions to the edge of extinction. Last year, only 1,300 alewives returned to the river.

Since the ban was passed, the Canadian government has trucked a small number of fish around the barriers in an attempt to maintain the alewife population. It hasn't worked.

Equally important, a major scientific study released last year examined bass/alewife interactions in the region's lakes. The report's authors write that the study was done to "provide critical information needed to bridge a longstanding international impasse in the management of smallmouth bass and alewives in the St. Croix River system" — in other words, to inves-

Naomi Schalit, one of the three members of the newspaper's editorial board, was from 2003 to 2006 executive director of Maine Rivers, which coordinated the scientific study examining interactions between alewives and bass in the St. Croix River.

tigate the actual interactions between alewives and bass in the watershed.

The study was directed and vetted by a high-level scientific advisory committee whose members were drawn from the U.S. National Marine Fisheries Service, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Maine Department of Inland Fisheries & Wildlife and Maine Department of Marine Resources, Canada's Department of Fisheries and Oceans and the New Brunswick Department of Natural Resources.

The report's science was peer-reviewed by a variety of state, federal and independent fisheries experts from both Canada and the United States.

The scientists looked at everything from bass tournament data to stomach contents of bass and alewives in the St. Croix watershed and concluded that alewives pose no threat to the region's bass; indeed, in some cases, it was demonstrated that bass grew better in the presence of alewives.

The report's summary states: "The guiding assumption of current smallmouth bass-alewife co-management in the St. Croix drainage has been that anadromous alewives are a negative influence on smallmouth populations and fisheries. This study found no evidence to support this assumption based on historical Maine IFW data, stomach contents data collected in 2005, or tournament fishery data."

Now, a bill, L.D. 1957, An Act to Restore Diadromous Fish in the St. Croix River, is being considered to reverse the St. Croix alewife ban and allow the fish limited and controlled access to the rest of the river.

Like previous attempts to reverse the St. Croix alewife ban, this bill is meeting stiff resistance from the guides. They say alewives threaten not only bass, but salmon and smelts as well.

They are afraid and they are waging a bitter fight to protect the source of their livelihoods. And in the past, they have found sympathetic ears in the Statehouse, where the inability to effectively help jumpstart Washington County's struggling economy has combined with a historic deference toward sportsmen to keep the alewives out.

Until recently, the guides have been able to raise enough doubt about the impact of alewives on inland waters to hold off opening the river again to the migrating native fish.

But that is true no longer. Alewives have been amply demonstrated to perform a crucial function in our state's rivers, oceans and lakes; they are an important food source for everything from striped bass to eagles, mink and osprey and groundfish. They're a significant source of bait for lobster fishermen in the spring. They provide income to riverside towns that have historically exercised their rights to harvest alewives. They provide "cover" for vulnerable salmon smolts, which migrate out to the ocean when alewives are migrating in from the ocean.

Conversely, alewives have not been shown scientifically to be a menace to bass in the St. Croix system. They are a shared resource for all the species that depend on the river and the ocean it feeds — from humans to wildlife.

In the end, opposition to alewives in the St. Croix is misguided. The river needs to be opened.