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Shenanigans on St. Croix : Alewives get smoked again

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By Kerry Hardy

When Samuel de Champlain visited the St. Croix River in 1605, he marveled at the quantity of fish being taken by the Wabanaki fishermen there. “In May and June,” he wrote, “so great is the catch here of herring [alewives] and bass [striped bass] that vessels could be loaded with them. The Indians resort thither sometimes five or six weeks during the fishing season.”

Sadly, those massive alewife runs that provided millions of pounds of protein to the ecosystems of both the St. Croix and the Gulf of Maine were decimated in the dam-building craze of the early 19th century, and for two centuries now Maine has lacked the wisdom and will to bring them back.

If anything, Maine’s management of its natural resources is getting worse, not better. By “Maine,” I’m referring primarily to our executive branch of state government, which keeps getting warnings, and even spankings, from the federal government for failing to enforce, or even follow, important laws protecting wild creatures and their habitats.

“Maine” didn’t save its bald eagles; the federal Endangered Species Act did that. “Maine” didn’t clean up the Androscoggin River; the federal Clean Water Act did — or at least it tried, until the state decided to stop following it.

And, as river activist Doug Watts of Augusta has pointed out in recent testimony and legal filings, Maine’s executive and legislative branches have been operating outside the law on the St. Croix since at least 1995. By repeatedly enacting and enforcing laws to keep the native alewife and blueback herring from reaching their necessary and historic spawning grounds, we as a state are violating the Clean Water Act that our own Ed Muskie fought so hard to bring into law. We may have torn down Edwards Dam on the Kennebec, but metaphorically speaking, we still can’t get the rest of Maine’s alewives past Augusta.

Of course, alewives on the St. Croix aren’t just ours, they’re also New Brunswick’s. When Maine started blocking alewives on the St. Croix a few years back, New Brunswick wisely started trapping them and trucking them upstream around our barricades.

To avoid having two governments working at such cross-purposes, we now have an International Joint Commission, or IJC, in charge of that river’s fisheries.

Unfortunately, the latest so-called “adaptive management plan” currently being eyed by the IJC is largely just a continuation of Maine’s misguided and illegal policy. The plan isn’t much interested in what used to happen on the St. Croix. It has decided — by some baffling and unexplained sort of executive fiat — that alewives are only entitled to roughly the lower one-third

of the St. Croix watershed. This arbitrary decision is hard to explain unless you know the behind-the-scenes agenda driving the whole process.

It's an attempt to appease the smallmouth bass fishing advocates, who fear that returning alewives to the entire St. Croix watershed will cut into their livelihood and pleasure. In essence, the bass boys are being given West Grand and all of the Chiputneticook lakes, in hopes that they'll stop screaming long enough to let us pass a little bit of alewife protection, rather than the full protection that alewives are entitled to under both natural and national law.

The drafters of this newest plan try to dress it up using phrases like "best available science," but such claims ring hollow. In fact, they ignore the one study that is indeed the "best available science" on bass-alewife competition: the 2002 Kircheis report, a 10-year study on the interaction of the two species in Maine's Lake George.

That study showed that bass and alewives could happily coexist in the same water body, with no detriment to either population. Why is it ignored, and even omitted from the new report's bibliography? Maybe because its findings are inconvenient to the St. Croix bass interests.

In short, the ad hoc working group that drafted this ill-conceived plan doesn't seem especially interested in good science, or even legality. They just want something that's politically palatable. In my opinion, the plan they've put forth is barely worth the paper it's written on — suitable to wrap fish, perhaps, but certainly not to manage them.

The sooner we discard it and start following the Clean Water Act, the better.

Kerry Hardy of Rockland is an ecohistorian and author of "Notes On A Lost Flute: A Field Guide to the Wabanaki."