Conservation Council *of* New Brunswick
Conseil de conservation *du* Nouveau-Brunswick

Restoring Sea-Run Fish and Rivers in N.B.

Purpose

This document discusses opportunities for sea-run fish and river restoration throughout New Brunswick and presents opportunities for the New Brunswick government to support these efforts. It emphasizes the impressive work being done on the Skutik (St. Croix River) by the Peskotomuhkati Nation and its partners.

Issue Summary

Sea-run fish species like gaspereau, American shad, American eels, sea lamprey, Atlantic and shortnose sturgeon and Atlantic salmon provide a critical interface between ocean, river, and forest ecosystems. By caring for and restoring these fish species, we can strengthen freshwater and saltwater ecosystems and the communities that rely on them. The ongoing restoration of the Skutik (St. Croix River) led by the Peskotomuhkati Nation with support from various levels of government and from environmental organizations like the Conservation Council can serve as a template for efforts across the province.

Background and Challenges

- The Skutik River was once home to fish runs of over **50 million gaspereau** each spring, but dams and habitat destruction caused a drastic decline. By 2002, only 900 fish were counted in the river.
- Since 2012, restoration efforts led by the Peskotomuhkati Nation have made a major impact (CCNB, 2022, Hakai Magazine, 2024; Peskotomuhkati Nation at Skutik, 2022):
    - **2023 fish count**: Over 800,000 (last count at Milltown fishway before decommissioning)
    - **2024 fish count**: Likely over 1 million
- A major turning point was a successful campaign leading the state of Maine to stop blocking existing fishways on the U.S. side of the river.

- In 2023-24, with support from the Peskotomuhkati Nation and many other partners, NB Power restored historic Salmon Falls by removing the Milltown Dam, the first major barrier on the Skutik.

Recommendations

1. **Support Restoration Efforts on the Skutik (St. Croix River)**
    - Provincial departments, including Agriculture, Aquaculture and Fisheries, Environment and Local Government, and Natural Resources and Energy Development, should collaborate with the Peskotomuhkati Nation and the Conservation Council to advance ongoing river restoration efforts.

2. **Sign the Skutik River Statement of Cooperation**
    - The New Brunswick government should formally join Canadian and U.S. federal agencies and Maine state agencies in signing the Amended Skutik River Statement of Cooperation to support long-term restoration efforts. (Document attached for review)

3. **Strengthen Funding for River Restoration**
    - Increase and protect funding for the Environmental Trust Fund, which is a key resource for restoring rivers and sea-run fish populations in New Brunswick.

Significance and Impact

- New Brunswick's coastal waters are under stress, with declining fish populations and disrupted ecosystems. (Gulf of Maine Institute, 2024. CBC, 2022).
- Forage fish species like Atlantic herring and mackerel, which are essential food sources for commercial fish species (haddock, halibut) and marine wildlife (whales, seals, seabirds), are in decline (CBC, 2024, Oceana 2024).
- Restoring sea-run fish like gaspereau helps rebuild marine food webs, supporting both ecosystems and local fisheries.
- The Skutik River restoration is a major success story, showing that with Indigenous leadership, government support, and community involvement, we can reverse long-term environmental decline.
- Supporting this project will demonstrate how river restoration can help tackle climate change, boost biodiversity, and improve ecosystem resilience.

Analysis

Impact on Stakeholders and Rightsholders:

- As noted above, the Peskotomuhkati Nation at Skutik, the Passamaquoddy Schoodic Riverkeepers, and other Indigenous government entities, citizen groups, and other individuals have been at the forefront of sea-run fish and river restoration efforts. The restoration plan developed by the Peskotomuhkati Nation at Skutik notes that “Restoring sea-run fish will provide food for a wide variety of fish and wildlife inhabiting Passamaquoddy Bay and the Gulf of Maine. The Skutik River has been, and can be again, the food factory for Passamaquoddy Bay. While habitat and ecosystem restoration are the primary concerns, the Peskotomuhkati Nation recognizes that the health of human communities is intricately linked to the health of the ecosystem. Therefore, a core aim of this Plan is to restore sea-run species to such an extent that they can support the Peskotomuhkati needs.” (Peskotomuhkati Nation at Skutik, 2022)
- Coastal communities and ecosystem-dependent industries like fishing and tourism will also benefit from sea-run fish restoration. Renowned fisherman turned scientist, and 2005 McArthur Award winner Ted Ames laid out the critical role of sea-run fish like gaspereau in sustaining marine ecosystems, including commercial groundfish species like cod (Ames, 2004). Further, Mr. Ames has personally supported efforts to restore gaspereau on the Skutik (Portland Press Herald, 2012)

Risks and opportunities

Risks:

- Restoring native sea-run fish populations and river and coastal habitats has very few risks. While there may be tensions around decisions about how to address issues fish passage at dams or when to allow fishing for commercial bait, successful restoration efforts will provide broad benefits.

Opportunities:

- As noted above, gaspereau restoration is critical to groundfish recovery (Ames, 2004), species critical to the ecosystem and commercially valuable. In addition to groundfish, gaspereau provide a key food source for whales, seabirds, seals, and freshwater fish (Nedeau, 2003). Further, the restoration effort so far has led to international media coverage of the Skutik and even led to significant visitor traffic to witness the decommissioning of the Milltown Dam and the restored Salmon Falls.

Current Status

- Teams led by the Peskotomuhkati Nation (which includes the Conservation Council and others) on both sides of the Skutik conduct water quality monitoring, habitat assessments, scientific fishing, barrier assessment, and restoration projects.

- Salmon Falls has been restored through the removal of the Milltown Dam, creating significantly more potential for fish runs to grow closer to historic levels.
- Plans are being developed to improve fish passage at other key dams on the main stem of the Skutik, namely Woodland Dam and Grand Falls Dam. Their efforts are focused on the western side of the Skutik (Maine), in partnership with entities on both sides of the river.

Key Contacts

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