

'Endangered' listing essential to restoring Atlantic salmon

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Published:

Friday, June 26, 2009 2:03 PM EDT

Last week the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, after years of scientific study, announced the endangered species listing of Atlantic salmon on the Kennebec, Androscoggin and Penobscot rivers. Critical habitat for species restoration was also published.

How much of a victory is it?

It's been four years since the Endangered Species Act citizen petition was filed but well over a century of decline not only for Atlantic salmon but other important species in Maine's rivers and the Gulf of Maine as well. "Legend has it you could once walk across these rivers on the backs of salmon," said Rowan Gould, director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

But they are all but gone. As are cod. As is the once healthy Gulf of Maine fishery.

Within this species decimation lies a perpetual bias that man-made industry, and money, is held in higher esteem than our natural world. The myth that preserving, protecting and enhancing our environment means we will undermine economic health is a false and dangerously shortsighted premise. Industries, along with Gov. John Baldacci, suggesting that listing Atlantic salmon in these three rivers will destroy the economy, ignore the centuries' long economic benefits of the Gulf of Maine fisheries, as well as fisheries worldwide. So too does it ignore related industries, traditional and non-traditional, that have buoyed our Maine economy for centuries: Local, sustainable industries.

Further, the cost of environmental degradation can no longer be assessed at zero. While NOAA considers the economic impact of listing the Atlantic salmon on major industries (pulp and paper, blueberry growers, etc.), we refuse to count the economic and environmental impact of NOT listing the salmon.

Look back all the way to the 1600s and you will see a rich heritage, culture and robust economic foundation stemming from the Gulf of Maine and river-run fisheries.

Complaints of dams destroying the health of the fisheries and local economies also go back centuries.

We did not heed those concerns then. Here we are now.

Damage cannot be assessed merely through economic terms. We are faced with difficult economic and environmental times. But economic concerns are given a weight driven by industry, not by evidence or common sense.

Suggesting the economic impact of protecting Atlantic salmon is somehow more important than the environmental is like saying my red blood cells are more important than my white. It is suicidal.

Those who suggest that conservation efforts thus far are adequate need only open their eyes. The federal status review is thorough and scientifically indisputable. The lack of returning salmon is obvious. To suggest we've done all we can, ridiculous.

NOAA and USFWS made it clear dams are the single biggest obstacle to salmon recovery. Year after year provisions to create fish passages at these "cash cows" (virtually no capital investment in infrastructure and free energy from the publicly owned rivers, with the majority of the power being sold out of state) are rebuffed. Every year the biological diversity necessary for health of our rivers and the Gulf of Maine, declines.

The governor and state agencies have done an excellent job of protection ... of industry, not our publicly shared resources, nor these animals.

On June 18, The Times Record published an editorial about this issue suggesting both that the governor was upset by the listing and that environmentalists and anglers were not united behind it.

Gov. John Baldacci stated that the Endangered Species Act listing "ignores Maine's strong track record in species management and our need for a flexible approach which will enable us to use all our tools to work with stakeholders to manage Atlantic salmon."

Maine's strong track record of species management?

Our salmon fishery is gone. Eels, incredibly important for river and the Gulf of Maine's health, in free-fall decline. Alewives kept from their habitat. Urchins fished out. Bucket biology being practiced with impunity. Blueback herring in peril.

We have found the state agencies to be strong proponents for the economic health of the industries they are meant to regulate. Gov. John Baldacci's "strong track record" isn't backed with evidence.

As far as environmentalists and anglers not being united on this issue; the Atlantic Salmon Federation stood, stunningly, almost alone in its opposition to the listing. Friends of Merrymeeting Bay, Friends of Sebago Lake, Friends of the Kennebec Salmon, Maine Audubon, Trout Unlimited, NRCM and others [listed at Federal Registry] not only supported the listing, but were unanimous in asking that the "Critical Habitat" designation be extended to the Atlantic salmon's historical range.

It is essential that Maine shifts its focus to the health of our public natural resources, strengthening traditional, sustainable industry, bringing the Gulf of Maine back from the brink of total collapse, and invest in the long-term viability of our interdependent economic and environmental health. We believe taking these steps to protect this species, and correcting past errors of judgment and inaction, help start us on that path.

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