



From School to Pool

By Martin Silverstone

Youth programs based on the Atlantic salmon are flourishing in educational institutions and social centres. Salmon anglers are opening up their hearts, and their waters, to a new generation and the potential payback—new blood on the rivers—is enormous.



TOM MOFFATT/ASF



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Things were just not going as planned. It was a typical March school morning at Seaside Elementary on Caldwell Road in Eastern Passage, Nova Scotia. Beth Fougere, the grade five classroom teacher, was in a bit of a quandary. For over eight years she had incorporated the life cycle of the Atlantic salmon into her class curriculum. As part of the *Fish Friends* program, the pink eggs would arrive, as they did on this blustery winter's day, with Carl Purcell, the kindly volunteer from the Nova Scotia Salmon Association. Her kids would gather around watching carefully as the retired school principal placed 200 pink eggs into the large, specially designed fish tank that had been attracting questions since it was first set up in the classroom, a month ago.

Now, Fougere wanted to have the children examine one of the eggs under a microscope to learn more about its structure.

Of course, she also knew that when the students learned the egg would die, some would protest, but in past years she was always able to use this opportunity to provoke a discussion of mortality and survival of the fittest.

As in past years, the egg transfer went smoothly, now it was time to remove one of the eggs. Would someone volunteer? There were no raised hands. Yes, the class understood that not all animals survived, that death was an important part of the natural process. She was able to explain that forestry practices like clear cutting may allow silt to enter the river and coat the eggs or even a natural earth slide could do this. "Yes," Miss Fougere, they answered her queries, "we know that when an egg dies it can mean more food for the other salmon."

Still, not one child would volunteer to remove an egg. They had been told that these eggs were under their charge, and after they hatched the fry would be released in the Sackville River. Students had all agreed to carefully watch water temperature, feed the fry, clean the tank, and care for them. The question of stewardship normally didn't arise until many weeks later, as part of the course curriculum, but this class had jumped ahead. There would be no microscope examination today or any other day, because these were "their" fish, and their fish weren't going to die.

The eggs, the tank, even the seemingly chance discussion on survival and mortality are all part and

parcel of *Fish Friends*, a long running, innovative environmental elementary school program developed by the Atlantic Salmon Federation. For about ten years, students taking part in *Fish Friends* have learned fundamentals in ecology, including the basics of habitat protection, the importance of biodiversity, and even more "adult" concepts like evolution and sustainability, and yes, even stewardship.

"It all fits nicely in the curriculum," says Beth Fougere. "Any problems, such as a dead fish (Fougere always performs a sea burial by flushing any dead fry down a toilet) open the door for students to figure out a solution themselves."

Fish Friends also integrates into other schoolwork like social studies, math and art. Even Purcell's involvement isn't limited to the eggs and fry. He comes back to Seaside with another angler in tow and teaches a popular whittling class where students

all carve a leaping salmon over the period of two months.

Seaside is not alone. Students in about 700 schools in eastern Canada and the states of Maine, Vermont and New York, delve into the mysteries of the natural world through the *Fish Friends* program. Come February, volunteers and ASF Regional Directors crisscross Atlantic Canada, Quebec and Maine delivering eggs to elementary schools. "It's busier than a beehive on a sunny day," says Danny Bird who helps

move eggs from the Mactaquac and Charlo hatcheries out to over 90 New Brunswick schools.

All this activity on the ice covered roads is old hat to the team of unpaid workers that keep *Fish Friends* up and running. Some years there may be trouble getting eggs, or sometimes the salmon eggs might react badly with something in the tank and die, in which case they must be replaced. Each region has its particular set of obstacles. In Newfoundland, Fred Parsons, a long-time *Fish Friends* volunteer, must time his visit to a school in the southern part of the province to coincide with the not-too-frequent ferry to the remote island of McCallum so that a jar of salmon eggs can reach 6 excited students, waiting at the dock.

It's hectic at this time of year for Bird and the other "eggmen", but when chaos reigns they get logistical support and encouragement from Debbie Perry, ASF's Education Coordinator. "It's first and foremost a school program," says the 36-year-old



At salmon fishing camps, youngsters learn a variety of skills, from fly-tying to casting (facing page). This supplements a solid grounding in biology many receive as participants in Fish Friends and from professor Salar, a cartoon character in the recently released CD aimed at elementary students (pages 27 and 29).

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mother of two (soon three) from her desk cluttered with order forms for filters, cooling units and air pumps. “We have developed a number of environmental themes, but the twelve lesson program uses approved science curriculum guidelines and follows the basic learning principles of actively engaging students, offering opportunities for applying what is learned, incorporating ideas developed out of the classroom and teamwork.”

The importance of this solid grounding in educational principles can't be overstated. Still, the majority of the *Fish Friends*'s volunteer network are salmon anglers and for pure inspiration there's nothing like the excitement that ripples through the community when a child connects the science to the salmon, as in this story of a *Fish Friends* graduate done good.

An early participant in the program went on a long awaited fishing trip with his grandfather to Newfoundland. Gramps soon hooked into and landed a good-sized fish. Of course he wanted that priceless shot of mentor and student holding up their prize. But as he went to lift the silver trophy out of the water, his 15-year old grandson was shocked. Did his grandfather not know of the incredible journey this fish took from egg to this glorious moment? Needless to say, the salmon was released, but this angler legend begs the question: What do we retain from school and why?

Environmental studies have become immensely popular in classrooms over the last thirty years, ever since the first “Earth Day” back in 1970. For most children, studying the environment—through field trips, museum visits and sophisticated hands-on programs like *Fish Friends*—becomes an Alice in Wonderland journey towards understanding our world, and their place in it. Today, most children view wildlife as important and good, yet some of this is lost on their way to adulthood when teenagers and young adults may become diverted into a maze of consumerism, cars and cash. And although most high school and university students can converse knowledgeably about global warming and pesticides, few can tell a beech from a birch or a pine from a fir. An osprey from an eagle? Forget it.

Getting teenagers closer to nature is a tough slog in this day of gee-whiz technology, High Definition T.V. and virtual visits made possible through print and electronic media. Most educators will agree that the logical follow-up to classroom work is an ongoing relationship with the natural world. And despite its reputation for being exclusive and the domain of the elderly rich, the sport of Atlantic salmon angling offers this opportunity to a growing number of youngsters. Preconceived notions aside, salmon angling can be expensive and good water is difficult to find in peak season, so fortunately, there are anglers who not only recognize the importance of



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breaking these barriers, but also have already begun to do so.

Nowhere are these barriers crashing down faster than in New Brunswick where one youth program surfaced last year with an unobtrusive bilingual advertisement posted in regional newspapers.

“Attention Young Fly Fishers. Enjoy Some of New Brunswick's Better Salmon Waters Free. June 24 to Oct. 8.”

The advertisement went on to explain that many clubs were making prime waters available to youngsters, accompanied by an adult, no fishing experience was required and only one such opportunity would be available per youth, per season.

Behind the initiative is Barry Morrison, Chair of the Youth Committee at the New Brunswick Council of the ASF and a member of the Miramichi Salmon Club (MSC). Two years ago Morrison was at a meeting of the New Brunswick Salmon Council. He looked around the table and realized he was one of the younger members. “And I've got more than a few grey hairs,” he laughs.

As a youngster, Morrison lived the carefree life of a river rat enjoying the piscatorial fruits of North America's “Rhine”, as he calls the Saint John River. The legendary Hartland Pool, where hundreds of salmon were caught regularly, was only a bike ride away.

“When I came home from school the river was at my doorstep, to fish, to explore, to learn,” he says with obvious nostalgia. “Now with this entire river system closed, where will today's kids get this access?” Legendary salmon rivers like the Tobique, the Kennebecasis, and the Nashwaak also became unavailable to the touch of a youngster's home-tied fly and imagination.

There's no arguing with Morrison. Without a doubt, in the light of salmon river closures, youngsters from the northern tip of New Brunswick to the very south, now grow up in one of the wildest provinces with nary a chance to fish one its internationally recognized treasures. He may sound like a romantic, but if anything Morrison is pragmatic. Where would the future Council members come from if a young New Brunswicker couldn't experience the delicious anticipation of following a dry fly float over a pool filled with giant fish fresh from the sea? Without salmon to lure a youngster to a river bank, would the thrill of sighting a diving osprey or disappearing shadow of a mink or lynx be forever replaced by the two dimensional images on a television or computer screen?

Morrison knew that many public pools on rivers still open to angling had not been kept up over the years and access could be very difficult, particularly for a youngster. His answer was simple—open up private



waters one day a week to kids looking to fish. Morrison sat down and mailed out letters to practically every New Brunswick club and lease holder.

In 2002, Fraser Lodge, Ponds, Pointe du Jour Salmon Lodge, Cain's River Road/Bridge Pool and the Miramichi Salmon Club were among those that offered water to young anglers one day a week. Each club provided a different experience. At MSC the day came complete with guide, canoe, and instructor. One lease holder simply showed angler and guardian to the water and left them to enjoy it for the day.

Was Morrison surprised by the response of clubs? "Not at all," he says. "I think everyone recognizes the advantages of getting youngsters out on the rivers."

If he wasn't surprised by the willingness to provide facilities and water, Morrison may have been a little taken back by the response to the ad. Hundreds of requests flooded clubs. They accommodated as many as possible, Ponds alone squeezed in over 25. Now the program is looking to expand (see *Keeping the Dream Alive*, pg. 31).

Other programs are also thriving. There are salmon camps, such as that run by the Miramichi Headwaters Salmon Federation, where groups of kids spend 3-4 days learning fly tying and casting techniques.

An eagerness to bring adolescents into the salmon mosaic is not unique to New Brunswick. Flashback to the Sportsmen's Show last winter at Place Bonaventure in downtown Montreal. On a Saturday morning the hall is packed with avid hunters, anglers, and other outdoor enthusiasts. But is the focal point of activity the giant kayak pool where participants could test a canoe or other watercraft? Is it the casting pool where the latest rods and reels are up for grabs? The high-tech climbing wall? The latest selection of ATVs? No, no, no, and no. The biggest, densest knot of people are clogged up in an insignificant back aisle, in front of the booth shared by ASF



By demystifying the fly tying bench, top, and teaching the secrets of casting, Atlantic salmon angling is fast drawing more youngsters to the river bank.

and its Quebec Regional Council, the FQSA. The commotion is so great that it would be easy to believe that perhaps free fishing on the Restigouche's Million Dollar Pool was being given away. But there is no such bonanza; instead, the eager crowd is riveted to a small computer screen watching the newest addition to Atlantic salmon-based school programs. The CD, complete with advanced animation and video techniques is part of a new parallel French school version of *Fish Friends*, called "Histoires de saumon". The presentation is filled with humorous sounds and antics by a cartoon professor and fish. There's also excellent footage of wild salmon leaping and spawning. There are many oohs and ahhs.

Quietly watching from the back of the excited crowd is a fit looking young man, his jet black hair

pulled back in a tidy ponytail. Mario Viboux has a vested interest in tools like "Histoires de saumon" because he runs an impressive youth angling program in Quebec that is truly unique the world over.

A few days later, I visit a brown storefront in Montreal on Wellington, in the working class district of Verdun, where Viboux holds court around a table set up with eight vices. Every corner of the room is crammed with fly tying material, fishing vests and angling magazines. A young boy walks in and Mario sets him up at a vice, so he can begin tying his first ever woolly bugger. During my visit a stream of youngsters enter, some look a little lost amid the strange feathers, threads and hooks, but others sit down and start to work quietly in a haze of concentration, ignoring both Viboux and me. What amazes me is how the better tiers nonchalantly assist those with less experience.

This is no accident—for Viboux and his assistant Isabelle Arnaud, fly fishing is only a pretext to instill life lessons into the kids that wander off these inner-city streets. At the Point de Mire youth centre, the fly

fishing program builds the kids'—many of whom are from underprivileged homes—confidence and self-esteem. Program participants, in turn, regularly take their fly tying skills to sport salons to teach others. The walls are covered in newspaper articles documenting their successes. "Pointe de Mire teaches fly tying to natives of the Manawan Reserve," shouts one headline.

Regardless of Viboux's social work goals of developing better adults, for the kids the ultimate payoff of the Point de Mire program—the icing on the cake, so to speak—is the annual two-week safari to visit a number of salmon rivers in Gaspé. Of course, fundraising is important for such an expensive trip, but it would be impossible without the special treatment ZECs afford the group. "We are able to visit some fine water, thanks to their cooperation," Viboux says happily.

On one such trip a couple of years ago *Salmo salar's* power to inspire became evident. "It was during our trip to the Grand Pabos that I first realized the awesome potential of a salmon river," 16-year-old Vanessa Caron wrote later in the French publication *Pêche à la Mouche*. "After arriving at Pool number 19, I began to tremble, so impressed was I



*The payoff to youth programs: new blood on salmon rivers could ensure *Salmo salar's* long term survival.*

by the number of salmon that surrounded me. After five good casts with my Blue Charm, I felt a terrible shock. It was my first salmon so I was quite scared, but at the same time I shouted with joy. This first salmon was one of the most beautiful experiences that I have ever lived and I am not ready to forget it."

It might be a long way from Miss Fougere's class in Narrow Passage, Nova Scotia, to the emerald green waters of the Pabos River, but the trail carved out by all these

youth programs passes through some dramatic scenery. It touches young students during their formative years and later may have a lasting impact on a young boy or girl during their turbulent teenage years. Wherever it goes, one thing is certain, the trail ultimately ends at a river, where more likely than not you will find a young girl knee-deep in the stream casting as she throws beautiful smooth loops out over water coloured molten gold by a sinking sun. On the bank stands an older man who is giving advice to his young charge, or is he? In the fading light, you suddenly realize that it is impossible to tell just who is the teacher and who is the student.

Martin Silverstone is the Editor of the Atlantic Salmon Journal.

Keeping the Dream Alive

FOR MORE INFORMATION ON:

- **Fish Friends or Magic on the River** (a curriculum aimed at teaching fly tying and casting techniques), contact Debbie Perry, 1-506-529-1384 or visit www.asf.ca
- **Point de Mire Youth Centre Flyfishing Program**, contact Mario Viboux at 514-767-9301 or visit www.snowbee.ca/pagesdesjeunes
- **FQSA Rods for Rivers Program** (rods provided for youth camps) and the "Histoires de saumons" compact disk (soon available in English), contact Louis Bernard Nadeau at 418-847-9191
- **Youth Fishing at Private Clubs in New Brunswick Initiative**, contact Barry Morrison, 506-633-3800
- **The Miramichi Headwaters Salmon Federation Flyfishing Camp**, contact Bonnie Wright, 506-246-8292