

## **Maine Voices: Grand Lake Stream Guides Association should help restore access of native fish to St. Croix River**

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J.R. Mabee, of the Grand Lake Stream Guides Association, once again raised the hoary and incorrect assertion that alewives were not historically present in the upper St. Croix River basin, in the June 27 Maine Voices column. He called for repeal of L.D. 72, the legislation enacted in 2013, which opened up the waters of the St. Croix after 18 years.

During that time, access by alewives returning from the ocean to their native spawning habitat had been blocked by unilateral action of the Maine Legislature. This was in spite of the fact that the St. Croix forms the international boundary between the United States and Canada and its waters are regulated by treaty between the two nations.

The Canadian Province of New Brunswick and the Canadian Federal Government have always recognized the value of alewives. During the blockage period, they worked hard to preserve alewives in the St. Croix River by stocking them on their side of the river in the Woodland Flowage.

During the height of the controversy over river access by these small native fish, two science-based studies were undertaken in 2007. One was by Lewis N. Flagg, a retired biologist formerly with the Maine Department of Marine Resources, whose career specialty had been anadromous fish such as alewives.

There is historical and biological evidence of the enormous numbers of alewives which were found in the St. Croix prior to the construction of dams beginning about 1825. In addition, there is archeological evidence of the presence of alewife bones in Native American fire pits at the Mud Lake Stream site some 65 miles above tidewater. This is well above the several falls which Mabee asserts were impassable. Flagg concluded that alewives were historically present in the headwater lakes of the St. Croix. This study has never been refuted.

The second study was commissioned by Maine Rivers. It was done by Theo Willis, a fishery scientist. He studied the interaction between native alewives and non-native small mouth bass. The research included both the lakes of the St. Croix system and other lakes in Washington County where bass and alewives co-exist and thrive. The study, likewise never refuted, establishes that alewives do not present an existential threat to bass, and that bass grow well on a diet of juvenile alewives.

These studies generated light where previously there had only been heat. The federal, state and provincial fishery agencies of the United States and Canada unanimously supported repeal of the legislation blocking alewife access at Woodland Dam and Grand Falls Dam. The Passamaquoddy Tribe of Native Americans, whose ancestral home is the St. Croix River Valley, from both Maine and New Brunswick, did likewise.

It is sad that the GLSGA will not recognize that L.D. 72 was not a mistake but corrected an injustice which barred recovery of this vital forage species from its native spawning habitat for almost two decades.

Many individuals and organizations worked to reopen the St. Croix River. L.D. 72 was sponsored by Passamaquoddy Tribal Representative Madonna M. Soctomah.

Its passage was supported by Brenda Commander, chief of the Houlton Band of Maliseet Indians, as well as numerous legislators including Sens. Chris Johnson and Dennis Damon; Reps. Walter Kumiega, Pete Doak and Mick Devin as well as the following organizations: Alewife Harvesters of Maine, Atlantic Salmon Federation, Conservation Law Foundation, Downeast Salmon Federation, Maine Audubon, Maine Conservation Alliance, Maine Rivers, NRCM, Penobscot East Resource Center, and the Schoodic Riverkeepers.

Alewives support freshwater and marine birds, mammals and fish. Restoration of depleted groundfish stocks such as cod and haddock in the Gulf of Maine in turn depends on restoration of alewives, which also furnish an important bait source for lobster fishermen.

GLSGA is beating a dead horse. It is time for them to come to the table and join those who are working to restore the full suite of anadromous fish native to the St. Croix River, including alewives and also American shad and Atlantic salmon.

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*Landis Hudson*