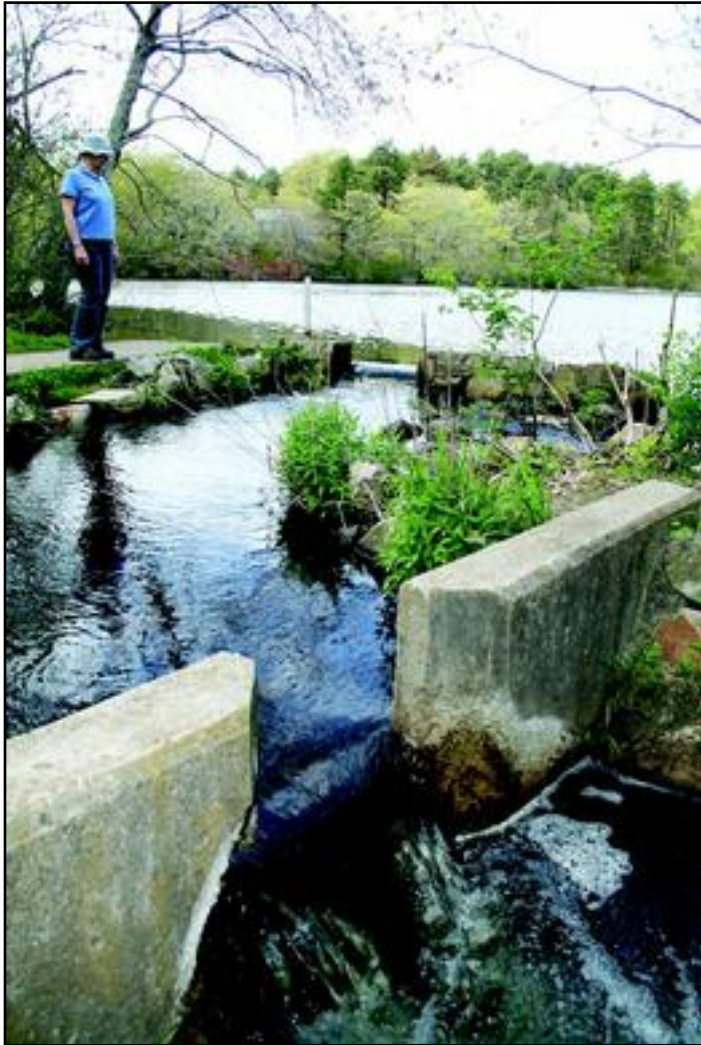


River herring counts running low: Big decline in three years



By Dave Colantuono
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Cape Cod -

The run is over.

Now let the tabulations begin.

Over the next few weeks herring monitors from all over the Cape will pore over this year's data with the hopes of gaining a better understanding of the Cape's imperiled anadromous species.

After almost a decade of stabilization, local river herring populations, made up of the alewife and blueback herring, have seen dramatic declines beginning in 2004.

According to researchers, the reasons for the decline are as varied as the local weather. Everything from the health of the herring's spawning grounds to increases in seal and striped bass populations have driven the number of herring returning to Cape rivers each year to drastic levels.

The recent drop in numbers led the state's Division of Marine Fisheries to impose a three-year moratorium on the harvesting, possession or sale of river herring in the state beginning in 2006. The results of the local monitoring programs will go a long way in determining the progress

being made in restoring the species.

"We will only be bettering the run with this moratorium," says Falmouth Herring Warden Chuck Martinsen.

"There are so many factors that could be causing their decline, but at least we have the ability to change what we are doing."

Local researchers have seen swings in recent years in both the number of fish returning and the time period in which the fish make the trip to their upriver spawning grounds.

Lou Turner, a board member on the Coonamessett River Trust, has been monitoring the herring count on the river for the last four years.

"The run this year has been very different than in the last three years," he says.

Beginning April 22, Turner and a group of 25 volunteers monitored the Coonamessett River seven days a

week over a four-week period. Taking 30-minute shifts, each observer counted the number of herring passing through a fish ladder during two five-minute time periods.

The research took place between 7 and 9 p.m., which anecdotal evidence showed to be the biggest runs. Martinsen, who is a constant figure along riverbanks throughout Falmouth, recalls seeing approximately 20,000 fish jamming the Coonamessett during one night last year.

This year, observers on the Coonamessett found the run was more spread out, leading Turner to add one more week of observation to the study. He estimated that 3,000 fish made the more than five-mile run to their spawning grounds in Great Pond on the last day alone.

The large number of fish counted on the last day of the monitoring program indicates how problematic the accuracy of these estimates can be. It also reflects the enormity of the task faced by conservationists and members of the Division of Marine Fisheries in trying to measure the extent of the issue.

“It is just so hard to know what is going on,” says Kevin Galvin, who heads the Marstons Mills Herring Count project. “Because the fish spend three to four years at sea [before returning to their spawning ground], we won’t see the results of this for awhile.”

Galvin and his group of volunteers have monitored the Marstons Mills River run, at the intersection of Route 149 and Route 28, for the last two years. His research estimates the number of fish reaching Mill Pond in 2006 at 6,900, a far cry from the 20,000 to 30,000 fish that made the run just two years ago.

Beyond counting herring, many of these same volunteers spend time each year clearing the rivers of debris and sediment that can block the fish’s access to their spawning grounds. Galvin also hosts a River Day celebration each May to raise awareness of local watershed quality and the importance of the herring population.

A basic food staple for everything from upland fish and birds to seals, striped bass and osprey, the herring are a basic food stock for a wide variety of local species. They also provide a favorite bait for local anglers.

Martinsen reports little if no poaching taking place from recreational fishermen, who for the most part respect the moratorium. Known within the fishing community as striper candy, in past years eager fishermen would remove hundreds if not thousands of fish from local rivers in hopes of catching a trophy bass.

Turner estimates that each female herring, once headed for the hook or lobster pot, will produce between 60,000 and 200,000 eggs each spring. The surviving fry, making the return trip to sea, should result a dramatic increase in the herring stock in the near future.

“The only way we are going to know if the moratorium is working is if there is a huge difference [in the count] each year,” he states.

While still processing the data from this year’s run, Turner’s initial estimates on herring in the Coonamessett show a decline over last year, nowhere near the 30,000 to 50,000 fish that would indicate a return to health. A few miles down Route 28, Galvin’s research shows a slight improvement in Marstons Mills. The real impact, however, won’t be seen for a few more years when the first of the moratorium fish return and are counted as they fight their way upstream.