

REVIEW

Atlantic salmon: a cycle of life

Sea Winter Salmon, Chronicles of the St. John River

by Mari Hill Harpur with Eileen Regan McCormick

Linda Leith Publishing, Westmount, Qc, 2015

An unusual and most beautiful book has recently been published by Linda Leith Publishing of Westmount. It is *Sea Winter Salmon, Chronicles of the St. John River*, by Mari Hill Harpur with Eileen Regan McCormick. The book emphasizes an important aspect of evolution – evolution in the sense that only by adapting to changing conditions can both nature, and man-in-nature, survive and even prosper.

Mari Hill Harpur and her husband, Doug Harpur, are presently the managers of an important fish tagging and catch-and-release program, as well as of a comprehensive scientific study location for *Salmo salar*, the Atlantic salmon.

The Atlantic salmon, unlike its Pacific cousin, does not die after spawning once – it can make up to three or even four round trips to spawn between the Atlantic Ocean and the specific fresh water river where it was born. These are long-lived, hardy fish. Some have been recorded (mainly before fish stocks began to decline after World War II) at up to thirty-five plus pounds. For a buoyant water creature, that is a monstrous four feet plus in length! Young salmon, called smelts, spend about three to five years in their birth pool of their river. They then make their way (in this case) to the Gulf of St. Lawrence, past the Strait of Belle Isle, and into the North Atlantic, where they feed avidly and grow considerably. After a few years, in the spring time, they respond to fishy romantic urges and make a return journey up to the river pool of their origin. Each period at sea is referred to as a “sea winter.”

These particular salmon claim the Rivière Saint-Jean (the St. John River) near the Innu lands at Mingan on the north shore of the Gulf. This is the vast coastal land just under the border with Labrador, opposite Anticosti Island. It is long settled, yet still isolated and wild today. The closest large town is Sept-Îles, quite a bit to the west. The origin of the European residents is English and French, and their traditional culture is based on primary resources, mainly fishing, much like that of the Gaspé and the Maritime provinces. There is a strong aboriginal presence – Innu and Montagnais, groups that, however changed by contact, have managed to retain their identities.

Mari Hill Harpur took over management of Hill Camp on the St. John River in 1987. It was originally leased by her great-grandfather, American railway magnate James J. Hill (1838-1916). The story of the Hill family and their complex and changing relations

with their property and the local residents is at the core of this book. Harpur starts her saga with, “My family has owned the lower part of this river for over a hundred years. Included in the river’s narrative is an account of its most important visitor, faithful companion and partner: the Atlantic salmon...” From the period of the great fishing camps of the late nineteenth-century millionaires to the present day, when Hill Camp has survived by adapting to new ecological and social realities, Harpur clearly and objectively relates her family’s story. As a social history, the book is outstanding.

However, the strongest impact of *Sea Winter Salmon* is visual. Mari Hill Harpur is a gifted photographer. She could have produced a coffee table book of her photos alone. She chose to combine both text and pictures, including many wonderful old photos taken by Hill family members over the generations, outstanding art work by various artists, charts, maps, time lines, and in-depth background information about the region, the people, salmon fishing and conservation methods.

The look of this book is absolutely beautiful. The colours, the page layouts, the reproduction of art and photos are all of the highest quality. The wonderful, peculiar, changeable light of the Gulf of St. Lawrence, the granite shores, the flowing waters, and the generations of people who have lived on this land – all are shown by the skill of an excellent photographer who found the right publisher.

–Reviewed by Sandra Stock

For more information:

Atlantic Salmon Federation, www.asf.ca, live release programs.

Marine ecosystems, www.acadiau.ca, scientific paper about program at Hill Camp Inc., and region.

