

Important fishery in heart of Queens County

2009

One day several years ago, Chris Waterman, then a student and now a teacher at North Queens Rural High, brought in some fried eel for people to try. I liked it. It was rich and bony, but the flavour was strong and good.

Some colleagues went screeching out of the room when he unwrapped it, aghast at the thought of eating eel. If only they could have been at the Mersey Tobeatic Research Institute on a recent Wednesday night. They would have been startled to find out just how popular eel is in some parts of the world, and also that an important eel fishery takes place right here in Queens Co.

The guest speaker was Louis Wamboldt, who operates an eel weir established over a century ago by his great-grandfather (in his other life, Louis has a successful automobile repair business).

He told the packed house that his great-grandfather operated an eel weir on an aboriginal site on the Medway River at First Falls, on the first rapids below South Brookfield, but that when it proved difficult in terms of getting the eels to market, the weir was moved to Fourth Falls. That is where Louis currently fishes.

He said the family also used to operate a weir on the Wildcat River, but in 1979 the Department of Fisheries and Oceans came to see him and said that so much effort was being placed in catching eels that they were reducing his license to one weir.

There is an ancient Mersey River eel weir in Kejimikujik National Park, parts of which can still be seen. The weirs are a combination of stone and wood and serve to funnel the eels in a river to a box, where they are collected.

There were eel weirs located up and down the eastern seaboard, many of them on what were originally aboriginal sites. Eels can be found from Greenland down the coast to South America. They live most of their lives in fresh water, but when they are mature and are ready to spawn, they make an amazing migration to the Sargasso Sea, which lies east of the Bahamas.

Female eels lay over a million eggs, which are fertilized by the male. Eels apparently die after spawning, though they can live to a ripe old age. One, kept in an aquarium, lived to be 85 years old. They can also grow to quite a size. Louis Wamboldt said the largest he had found was 47 inches long and

weighed six and a half pounds.

There are people who study eels and who make it their work to devise regulations for the fishery. It would, however, be difficult to find someone who knew more about eels than Louis Wamboldt. He keeps a close eye on the fishery and challenges people when he feels they are off base. When a biologist told him there was no such thing as a small silver eel, Louis argued with him and eventually sent him a specimen.

He is not desperately impressed with the Department of Fisheries and Oceans, which he thought was going to take a cautious approach to the fishery. He asked officials when they knew a safe harvest limit had been reached on a river. The answer was that they didn't, and that a river might have to be overfished in order to determine the limit.

Louis is concerned that stocks of eels appear to be declining. In the 1970s, after his grandfather died and he was on his own in the fishery, the average catch over the years was a ton and a

half to two tons of eels. Last year, he caught 1,385 pounds. He didn't fish eels this year, as the water levels were too high in Aug., and when they receded at the end of the month, four storms were predicted to come up the coast. He said he didn't want to waste three days of work and have nothing to show for it.

Louis also worried that the elver fishery could be having an effect on adult eel numbers. Elvers, he said, are eels under 10 cm in length. Yvonne Carey, who has run a springtime elver fishery in the area since 1992 took issue with that and defended her fishery, noting that one adult eel can lay a million eggs. Also, she said, elver fishermen were only licensed for specific rivers. She said there were only nine license holders in the Maritimes.

Louis Wamboldt said the eels he harvested were bought by a single buyer, who had a monopoly on the business. That buyer was from Port Elgin, New Brunswick. For a number of years Louis received \$2.50 a pound for the eels, but last year got only \$1.50.

He said the eels were exported to Germany, Portugal and Spain, where they are considered a delicacy. He said people there would pay enormous amounts of money to satisfy their appetite for the eels.



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