

Landlocked Salmon: Keep 'em or Release 'em?

Thanks to the simplicity of digital communications today and with Facebook social groups like NH Salmon and Trout Trolling we can all stay in touch where others are fishing, what they are catching and what they are doing with their fish.

I see a consistent trend with good anglers catching nice salmon and releasing them back into the lakes. It feels good to see these fish released and knowing that I may have a chance to catch them, some of which are trophies for sure. But is it best for the fishery?

There is a debate amongst anglers and fishery managers as to which is best, harvest the salmon or release them. For the last 10-12 years NHF&G has referred to "hook wounded" fish in their annual netting results. I have witnessed these fish at the netting sites. I think the point that F&G is trying to make is two-fold. First handle the fish gently, removing hooks with care and use rubber nets. Second, they are suggesting harvesting fish that are obviously wounded. But it remains that fishermen are going to catch and release or catch and keep, using tackle that they consider will produce the best results and generally not necessarily be focused on what is best for the fish and the fishery. I get that completely and frankly I don't think there is a right or wrong. Each angler is entitled to do what he or she think suits them best. Catching nice salmon earns bragging rights, which is one of the greatest rewards in fishing. We all do it. Before the days of smart phone cameras, I can remember my father Chet, proudly unwrapping big salmon from the freezer to show to others. I still do that. Adam and I keep our fish.

I consider myself an amateur fish biologist since for years I have been interested in learning all I can about fish and fisheries management but do concede that my experience and knowledge is along the "tribal" or anecdotal variety. I have read about and studied fish from different perspectives including trolling for them in both fresh and salt water, fly casting on remote streams, worm dunking, lure casting, observing fish while scuba diving, extensive underwater photography, and underwater action filming.

Once I contributed underwater filming for a national fishing show. I am intimate with salmon and the underwater world.

Our NH salmon are part of a “put, grow and take” fishery as most all stocking programs are. Harvesting salmon at a certain size is important to be consistent with what the fishery managers plan for a healthy sustainable fishery. I keep my limit of two salmon most days. F&G talks about hook wounding to encourage harvesting the fish rather than returning them which weakens the fishery. But there is another factor that few, if any consider in what happens to a fish that has been hooked, fought, and brought to the net. Read on.

Take a look at the picture here of the two 14” filets I took from a 22” NH salmon. In the middle of the filet, you see the line of darker flesh. This area corresponds to the lateral line along the side of the salmon. Years ago, when I was actively pursuing giant tuna, I became associated with a few top-notch charter captains. When these captains didn’t have charters, they would get together and commercial fish for tuna. Meaning they would catch what they could and sell for income. Quantity was what they focused on. They didn’t want to fight a giant tuna for hours (like I did) but focused on striking the harpoon as quickly as possible. They knew that after about 15 minutes of what they called the aggressive fight, the tuna would come to the surface and roll to its side. Their goal was to be at that exact spot when the tuna came up and throw the harpoon. If they didn’t accomplish that the tuna would dive and go into what they called the endurance fight. They believed that the area along the lateral line was the attack muscle and after 15 minutes that muscle burned out and the tuna could no longer maintain an aggressive fight. I have learned that all game fish have the same physiology. In every fight I see one of two scenarios unfold. Either an aggressive short fight or a more bulldog type of endurance fight.

After a hooked landlocked salmon has fought for a few minutes, you see it come to the surface and roll to the side. The attack muscle, or lateral line area, has burnt out, hence the dark meat. Like those

captains I believe that after the attack muscle, or lateral line area expires, fish cannot sustain the same aggression that it has used to survive to this point in its life. I also believe that the next time the salmon is caught it fights with less vigor. **In lakes with less catch and release the fish get bigger.** The 3.4 lb. salmon I caught here felt like a wild 5-6 lb. fish. Frankly I thought it could be a personal best. I didn't think I would boat it. I don't think it had ever had a sustained fight previously. I have caught 5 lb. salmon where the fight was more lackadaisical, but still exciting. They didn't have multiple line stripping runs and jumps during the fight this fish had. They did the usual dive at the boat maybe one jump but not the tackle breaking fight of a "fresh" fish. My point here is that hook wounds are not the only impact a caught and released fish endures. When released they are not the same. They won't feed as aggressively and won't grow as fast.

I am a firm believer in keeping caught fish in lakes that are primarily stocked fish. NH landlocks are arguably one of the best tasting freshwater fish. I would place them higher on the taste and nutritional scale than farm raised ocean salmon by far. If these filets were for sale in a fish market, they would demand high prices. Very tasty indeed.

Releasing fish has caused more problems for fisheries than we can put a finger on. In some fisheries managers have tried to drastically reduce "kept" fish to improve the fishery and have learned this can be a mistake. Take Aziscohos lake in Maine which I have fished ever spring religiously for more than 20 years. It used to be you were allowed to keep one fish of a certain size. During those years you were lucky if you caught a 16" landlocked but could catch a dozen of 8-12" fish. Hardly anyone kept fish, catch one, keep it and you are done fishing for the day so who can blame them. But the fishery went to hell. All fish were small. Finally, the managers went to the other extreme and said keep all the fish you catch. Even throw them away. They wanted to get these fish bigger, so less competition for smelt was the approach. Today Aziscohos has larger salmon and most fish I catch are 17-19".

I believe it's best for our "put and take" fisheries if you keep your two salmon limit like was common for the first 40 years I fished Winni. Guys used to brag that they had their two salmon and were back at the boat landing by 7 am. Keep 'em and cook 'em!