

In 1996, a \$15.7 million value was placed on the Salmon River fishery. Without the Salmon River Fish Hatchery in Altmar, Salmon River Program Coordinator Fran Verdoliva says “a fishery on that scale wouldn’t exist.” Welcoming 75,000 to 100,000 visitors from April through November each year, “it’s the prime hatchery that produces the fish for Lake Ontario and Erie,” he adds.

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“What a difference 35 years makes,” says **Fred Kuepper**, an avid angler. “My first experience with Salmon River fishing was with my dad back in 1972. It was one of those father-son days where I was just happy to be with dad, my fishing guru. He had heard of efforts to stock the River with large salmon and trout and felt he needed to show me we could catch these things.”

How true Kuepper’s words of retrospect would prove to be, as fisheries managers reported late this past summer that they are excited but cautious about the finding that five to ten million Chinook salmon were naturally reproduced in the Salmon River in 2005. The finding comes from a NYSG-funded project carried out by SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry graduate student **Dustin Everitt**.

In fact, SUNY ESF Dean of Research **Dr. Neil H. Ringler**, project leader, says, “The calculations are actually quite conservative, and the number of juvenile Chinook for 2005 could easily have been close to ten million fish.” Everitt worked under the guidance of Ringler, assisted by **Michael**

Connerton, and with hydroacoustic analysis expertise from Cornell University’s **Dr. Lars Rudstam**, project co-investigator.

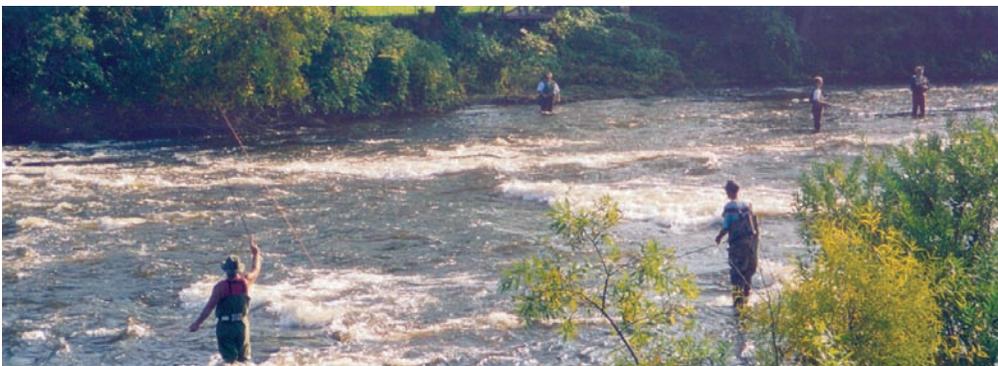
NYSG Fisheries Specialist **David B. MacNeill** says the finding comes after a litany of meaningful research conducted on the Salmon River by SUNY ESF, the NYS Department of Environmental Conservation (NYSDEC), the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) and Sea Grant since the late 1970s.

“The good news now is that the Salmon River obviously has good habitat for natural spawning,” says MacNeill. Even better, the Salmon River and other Lake Ontario tributaries were recently touted for their strong draw with anglers. According to the NYSDEC’s Fall 2005 Lake Ontario Tributary Angler Survey, the total estimated angler trips from all 28 tributaries was 256,907. This 2005 estimate, of which 30 percent of the total trips took place on the Salmon River, represents about three times as many angler trips as were estimated on the open lake.

Estimated angler effort from the Lake’s boat fishery in 2005 was 1,119,080 angler hours or 85,576 angler trips from April through September. Estimated effort for the tributary fishery from September through November was 805,491 angler hours, or about 72 percent of the open lake effort.

The 2005 angler survey commenced the day after Labor Day on the Salmon River and mid-September elsewhere and ran through April 2006. It is the first comprehensive tributary survey since DEC’s 1984 New York State Great Lakes Angler Survey.

“A great deal of emphasis is placed on the importance of Lake Ontario’s fisheries and their economic impact on the local community,” says MacNeill. “But let’s not forget about



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the tributaries, where, ecologically, higher than anticipated numbers of natural salmon are being found. And, as we see in the DEC's angler survey, tributary expenditures are high economically as well."

"The charterboat industry usually is a driving force for decision-making at the 'State of the Lake' talks," MacNeill continues. "But a rise in angler effort and expenditures in streams such as the Salmon River will bring more and more tributary fishermen to the table now." He cautions, though, that both the Sea Grant study and DEC survey should not be viewed as divisive agents between the Lake and River folk. "What they show is that we have an array of world class fishing opportunities in the Lake Ontario watershed – both in the open waters of the lake and in the tributaries."

But does it take a different kind of angler to fish the Lake versus tributaries like the Salmon River? "The Salmon River is the first Lake tributary to have a lower catch limit to conserve fish populations," says **Connie Rodgers**, Manager of the Douglaston Run in Pulaski, which provides private access to some points along the Salmon River. "The difference here from the Lake is that people see this as a resource that's not as endless."



A freshly caught brown trout on Lake Ontario was this angler's prize for the day back in the late '80s/early '90s, when then Salmon River Douglaston Run river keeper Fred Kuepper snapped the shot. Kuepper, an avid fisherman himself, currently runs an Outdoor Adventure Guide Service, online at www.outdooradventureguide.net.



While not a record-breaker, this Chinook salmon was caught by an angler on a driftboat trip from Altmar to Pineville in 2005. The largest sportfish caught to date? According to NYSDEC's freshwater fishing records, it is a 47 lb 13 oz Chinook salmon caught by angler Kurtis Killian in the Salmon River in September 1991.

Photos this page courtesy of Fred Kuepper

"The Salmon River is the heart and identity of the community," says Rodgers. "It's a family destination now." And while many flock to the River during peak salmon season, between mid-Sept and October, Rodgers says more and more people are discovering that "It's a year-round fishery." While salmon and trout are the catches of the fall, Steelhead fishing is big news in the winter.

Part of the River's allure may come down to a simple game of dollars and cents. "There's less of an expense here," says Rodgers. "Even if you hire a guide, it's cheaper than a captain's fee for a day out on the Lake."

And there's a 'Kuepper connection' at Douglaston Run as well — he was the Run's first river keeper when the program began in 1987. For six years, Kuepper helped to, as he puts it, "create a sportfishing environment where anglers could fish as fishing was meant to be — where they could safely bring their families and rely on a good outing." As for turning anglers onto more ethical fishing practices and away from now banned practices such as snagging, where anglers would use multiple baited or non-baited hooks to maximize fish catch, Kuepper says, "Education through seminars, meetings, guiding, classes, and just one on one conversations was and remains key."

— **Paul C. Focazio**

with additional information from Kara Lynn Dunn



... for Salmon River facts, more on Sea Grant-related research, the DEC angler surveys, and personal accounts through the years from avid anglers Fred Kuepper, Charles Knauf, and James Kelso.