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Clark Rayner, a member of the Saint John River Chapter of Muskie Canada, holds a 50-inch muskie he caught in the St. John River.

Photo: SUBMITTED

There is no need to embellish tales of the one that got away when you're fishing for muskies in the St. John River.

Already this year there have been two muskies caught in the 40-pound range, and the provincial record is around 50 pounds, says Brandon Jones, chairman of the Saint John River Chapter of Muskies Canada.

"The way I first got involved was I was fishing on the St. John River for smallmouth bass. I caught a muskie by accident and I didn't really know what it was so I went online and I found the website muskiesnb.ca," he says. "I went on the forums and asked a few questions about muskies and the tackle I should be using. People contacted me and said, 'I can teach you' or 'I can take you out,' so I got involved that way."

He quickly learned that fishing for muskies is different.

"The lures are really big, the line is a lot different and the rods are different – it's a lot different than salmon or bass fishing."

Muskies Canada is a group of dedicated anglers, says Jones, adding that the group's three goals are conservation, research and education.

The organization has 13 chapters spread out across the country. The Saint John River Chapter has been around for approximately 10 years and is the third largest in the country.

“We have about 60 full-time members in our group, and it continues to grow. We have a really good website and we have tons of hits,” he says. “We get around 1,000 unique visitors a month on our website.”

The fact that the fish are really big helps bring attention to the sport, he says. “That actually draws people in, the size of the fish, and they want to learn more.”

It’s worth noting that those who fish muskies practice catch and release.

“One of the main goals of Muskies Canada is conservation, so we’re all catch-and-release anglers,” says Jones.

Though more and more people are fishing muskies for sport, currently the fish are classified as invasive.

“They’ve been in the St. John River system for about 45 years, in the northern parts of the river. They first showed up in the Mactaquac Dam about 25 years ago,” he says.

It’s believed that the muskies originate from the stocking of Lac Frontiere in Quebec in the 1970s. In the 1980s, young muskies migrated out of Lac Frontiere and populated the upper sections of the St. John River in both Maine and New Brunswick.

“What we’re looking for is we’re hoping to get a sport fishing designation. When (a fish is) classified as invasive, there really aren’t any management tools in place to protect the fish,” says Jones. “Right now, you can kill up to 10 a day. By getting a sport fish designation, when you get that designation, along with that usually comes responsible management with the fishery, so maybe you could keep one a day or something like that.”

The Saint John River Chapter of Muskies Canada is working to educate people on the fishery through seminars and booths at events such as the New Brunswick Provincial Exhibition. A lot of people aren’t aware of muskies and the situation they’re in.

“Part of the problem, in my opinion, is that the salmon are doing so poorly right now, and that’s what the main focus is on. Another part of the problem is that a lot of people are afraid of change, and muskies have been classified as invasive for so long,” he says. “But they’ve been here for so long and they are being fished for sport. There could be huge economic benefits for the province.”

Large groups come to the area to fish muskies, which has a positive impact on the local economy.

“As far as the economic potential, it’s been classified as a potential world-class fishery, and that’s been in Musky Hunter Magazine, the biggest, most popular muskie magazine in North America,” says Jones. “And every year, we have people coming here to New Brunswick filming shows on our big muskies.”

The local chapter wants to educate people and raise awareness about the muskie fishery and what it could mean for the province.

“Our group’s view is that we have a potential world-class fishery on our hands, and the fish are thriving in the river. They’re not going to ever be able to get rid of them, so why not embrace them and protect them and protect the resource so we can have it for years to come?” he says.

“We’re fortunate in a lot of ways because in other parts of the world where they have muskie, they have to spend millions and millions of dollars on stocking programs and millions of dollars to protect habitat and to create habitat for them, and it seems like the St. John River is the perfect environment. They’re populating on their own, they’re spreading out, there are more and more of them every year.”

They know this thanks to ongoing research being done.

“As part of the research, we have a DFO licence tagging study. So we’ve been tagging muskies in the St. John River for about seven years and we have about 600 tagged fish in the system. We try to track growth rates and seasonal movement. We have been doing a lot of research and we’re noticing that their population is spreading out and there’s more fish now than there used to be and they’re growing big and fast,” he says.

“We’d like to see muskies managed in a responsible manner, as they are everywhere else in their North American range. New Brunswick is the only place currently that I’m aware of that doesn’t have any management plan at all for muskies.”

It’s worth noting that the growth in the muskie population isn’t happening at the expense of salmon or trout.

“That’s a very popular misconception. They’ve done a lot of stomach content analysis on our muskies from the St. John River and they’ve found they like to eat a lot of suckers and gaspereau, perch and catfish,” says Jones. “That was a myth at the start, but now they know from a lot of other research the problems with the salmon are happening at the ocean level.”

As with other fish, muskie fishing is seasonal, he says, though it depends on the body of water.

“The season is a little different in the head pond than it is down in Fredericton, but this is basically the best time of year for muskie fishing right now, September and October,” he

says. “Our season is just starting to heat up right now, and we expect a lot of big fish are going to be caught this year.”

He adds, “I think eventually they will recognize it as a sport fish. It’s just a matter of time just because it is such a tremendous resource that isn’t going to go away.”

Jones is looking forward to spending time on the water fishing for muskies.

“It’s peaceful and mindless, and you’re not thinking about work or anything else. It’s nice. It’s kind of like a reprieve from the real world.”

To learn more about the Saint John River Chapter of Muskies Canada or muskie fishing, visit muskiesnb.ca.