

Environmental specialists from Belarus and Lithuania met at the CCB workshop in Vilnius 23-24 August 2007

As everybody knows, Belarus does not have direct access to the Baltic Sea, but the north-eastern part of the country lies within the Baltic Sea catchment area, a region into which the Atlantic salmon migrate to spawn in the river Vilia (Neris) and its tributaries. Not many salmon reach this far upstream, only the healthiest and most genetically strong of the species.

The CCB project "Restoration of wild salmon habitats – preparation and awareness raising" is currently under way in Belarus.



Snezhana Dubinok, Tamara Barsuk and Dr. Vitautas Kesminas and colleague measuring a salmon (Photo: Nina Palutskaya)

The preparatory activity started with a CCB Salmon “round table meeting” held in December 2006 in the town of Smorgon (Belarus) situated near the river Vilia, the main salmon migration route in Belarus. All participants including the Belarus environmental officials recognised the problem – extremely low and dwindling populations of Atlantic salmon in Belarus, which require complex conservation measures to be put in place urgently- but, the proposals for an action plan were not agreed.

Meanwhile the salmon spawning season is approaching fast and environmental authorities in the neighbouring countries of Latvia and Lithuania are beginning to prepare for the annual public action “Salmon”. In Lithuania environmental authorities have already begun seasonal salmon monitoring using specialist electro-fishing equipment. Although Atlantic salmon is protected in Belarus, environmental authorities have not even contemplated something similar and electro-fishing is illegal even for fisheries research purposes. At the same time experienced local fishermen in Belarus are getting ready for salmon fishing in the local rivers.

To facilitate transfer of “best practice” in wild salmon protection to Belarus it was agreed to hold a workshop in the Institute of Ecology at Vilnius University to show Belarus specialists how salmon conservation measures are implemented in practice in Lithuania. The other objectives were:

- To encourage the Belarus State Wildlife Protection Inspectorate to organise a public action “Salmon” in the Vilia river basin during the salmon spawning season (November-December)
- To demonstrate benefits of deployment of electro-fishing equipment for monitoring purposes
- To visit recently built fish ladders on the rivers Vilniyale and Zheimyana.

Upon CCB request the Lithuanian Ministry of Environment kindly sent invitations to the following Belarus government agencies: Ministry of Natural Resources and Environmental Protection; Department of Drainage and Water Management of the Ministry of Agriculture; State Wildlife Protection Inspectorate under the President of Belarus. Two agencies responded and the following Belarus representatives attended the workshop: Ms Tamara Barsuk – Head of Department of the State Wildlife Protection Inspectorate and Ms Snezhana Dubinok – Senior Scientist of the Water Management Institute. The third participant from Belarus

was Ms Nina Palutskaya, the CCB project leader.

The workshop began with an introduction at the Lithuanian Ministry of Environment hosted by Mr Vilmantas Graiciunas, Head of Nature Resources, Mr Vaydas Yysis, Chief Inspector of the State Environmental Inspectorate and Dr Vitautas Kesminas, Head of Laboratory of the Institute of Ecology at Vilnius University.

Dr Kesminas did a presentation on the Lithuanian experience of salmon conservation and monitoring in the last 10 years. There used to be about 120 salmon rivers in Lithuania. Currently there are 16 rivers where *Salmo salar* is found and about 80 rivers with brown trout spawning sites. Some potential salmon rivers are being purposefully restocked with young fish. Since the year 2000 Lithuania has been implementing the government programme focused on conservation of salmon spawning sites and building of fishways – 17 fishways have been built in the last 10 years. In the year 2004 Lithuania adopted a piece of legislation that banned any dam building activities on the 169 rivers, including Neman.

Mr Vaydas Yuris gave a talk about the public action “Salmon” which is being implemented in Lithuania by the State Environmental Inspectorate every autumn since 1998. Since the year 2002 the “Salmon” action is supported by police and the state border control units, based on the interdepartmental cooperative agreement. During the period from 1 September to 1 December the main salmon spawning sites in Zheimyana river basin are patrolled by environmental inspectors, police and the border control staff. Last year 200 staff from the Environmental Inspectorate and 1414 staff from the army and police were involved in patrolling. The patrol is organised around the clock in shifts with each shift maintaining a written record which is being handed over to the next shift. The implementation of the “Salmon” action is regularly reported by the national television, radio and newspapers.

The government’s salmon conservation programme and the “Salmon” public action have helped considerably in improving the situation. The different populations of salmon species in

Lithuanian rivers have improved to the level that brown trout has now been removed from the Lithuanian Red Data Book and it is now allowed to fish brown trout upon licence. *Salmo salar* was moved down to the protection category five and, like brown trout, will probably soon be included in the list of species allowed to fish upon licence.

The meeting at the Ministry was followed by a site visit to the recently built fishway at the Vilniyale river near Vilnius.



Fishway at the Vilniyale river (Photo: Nina Palutskaya)

The next day the group was involved in the fieldwork together with Dr Kesminas’s team at two salmon monitoring stations on the river Vilniyale. The monitoring process was documented and photographed including deployment and use of the electro-fishing equipment, fish counting, weight and size measurement, scale sampling and release. In one of the catches the team found two fully-grown brown trout, which was a bit unexpected at the end of August. Dr Kesminas suggested that a small number of fish probably reach far upstream on their way to spawning sites. The fish was safely released back to the river after the measurements had been taken.

The workshop was beneficial for both the visitors and the host. In the recent years there was a lack of communication between Lithuania and Belarus regarding trans-boundary waters, but trans-boundary environmental issues can only be addressed by cross border cooperation.

On my return to Belarus I phoned to the State Wildlife Protection Inspectorate in Minsk. Tamara Barsuk told that her report about the workshop was received well by her boss and that the information about the “Salmon” action was of particular interest. Tamara thinks that it should be feasible to organise a similar action in Belarus and that she would discuss the matter with colleagues.

Nina Palutskaya
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