

Belarus Environmentalists are Pressing Ahead with the Project to Protect Baltic Salmons

In a small Belarus town of Ostrovets the Atlantic Salmon Conservation Round Table was held on the 14th December 2007. It was the second round table focused on protection of Atlantic salmon in Belarus rivers. The first one was held in Smorgon a year ago. Ostrovets is the administrative centre of the district within the Belarus part of the Vilia river basin just a few miles away from the Lithuanian border. All Atlantic salmon spawning rivers in Belarus are in the Ostrovets district.

One might ask do we need such round tables? The short answer is YES. The long answer is: The current environmental management system in Belarus comprises several sectors which act independently with almost no coordination. It is in fact the top-down command and control system with excessive centralisation and strong intersectoral barriers, which discourage lateral communication between government agencies. Round tables, in Belarus are almost exclusively organised by NGOs, provide good opportunities for lateral communication between officials from the different government agencies. Round tables encourage officials to learn and cooperate with each other while NGOs are trying to identify and involve officials who are willing to do so.

It must be said that Belarus government officials, particularly those from the upper levels, don't see any reasons why should they be involved in discussions organised by environmental NGOs. They don't see any benefits of it simply because government agencies are not accountable to the people. They are only accountable to their masters within the existing top-down command and control system. Government officials usually ignore opportunities for participation in public discussions. That is why - when the round table organised in the provincial

town of Ostrovets is attended by officials from the central offices in Minsk and Grodno – we consider it as a bit of achievement and a very positive sign.

Recognition of the problem

The round table in Ostrovets was attended by ALL the invited ministerial officials, which was very unusual, but very good considering that Ostrovets is about 150 km away from Minsk. The main purpose of the round table held in 2006 was to generally draw attention of the government to the importance of the Atlantic salmon conservation. The round table in Ostrovets in 2007 was focussed on particular priority issues of salmon conservation which require decisions by both local and central government authorities.

One of the issues discussed was the impact of beaver dams. I wrote an article about this to the CCB News letter in November last year. In the course of the round table I presented a video I made while doing my fieldwork showing the dam and also our attempt to make it passable to the salmons. It is not clear how to save salmon rivers from beavers. They are a protected species listed in the Belarus Red Data Book. But the Atlantic salmon is in the Belarus Red data Book too. It shows the complexity of issues involved in the salmon protection from the regulatory point of view. The issue of "beavers versus salmons" triggered a lively discussion among the round table participants about the ways to find the best practical solution to the problem. It was a real brain storming session at the end of which Mrs Tamara Barsuk, Head of Department in the State Wildlife Inspectorate under the President of Belarus, concluded that IT WOULD BE FEASIBLE to reduce the impacts of beavers within the existing regulatory framework. But that would require some measures to be implemented by the district authorities preferably before the next salmon spawning season.

The problem that may not be resolved within the existing Belarus regulatory

framework is use of electro-fishing technique for salmon monitoring. The current national legislation makes electro-fishing illegal even for the government approved research. For the last two years through round tables and meetings we have been getting the message across to Belarus officials about the successful experience of using electro-fishing technique for salmon monitoring in Lithuania. Last time Dr Antanas Kontautas and this time Dr Vitautas Kesminas made detailed presentations of the technique and its practical implementation in Lithuania. And every time Belarus officials agree that this technique is what is needed, but nothing can be done until the national legislation is amended accordingly.

The issue was discussed at the round table and it was understood that the national legislation could be amended accordingly using the established procedures, if the Academy of Sciences initiated the process with the support by the Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources.

What Belarus can learn from the Lithuanian experience?

The essential part of the round table was the presentation and comments made by Dr Vitautas Kesminas of the Ecological Institute of the Vilnius University. He made an overview of the Lithuanian experience of salmon conservation for the last 15 years touching upon all important subjects from monitoring and research to the government policies and enforcement measures, including the national action "Salmon", salmon breeding and restocking, population monitoring and the recently built 17 fish-ladders. All these are part of the Lithuanian National Salmon Conservation programme.

The presentation by Dr Kesminas was received very well and provoked a very good discussion. The representatives of the Ostrovets Administration, who are responsible for the development plan of the district, raised a lot of questions. They were not sure who in Belarus may be able to fund the design and construction of fish-ladders. Although local governments have some

flexibility, they need approval by the central government for each budget line. Could the Ministry of Energy be able to provide funding? Or, perhaps the owners of the dams should fund the construction of fish-ladders? The law of Lithuania says that the owner of the hydro-power dam is responsible for the construction of fish-ladders. There are no similar pieces of legislation in Belarus.

As discussion progressed more questions were raised. Who would fund the salmon monitoring and how? Who would be able to lead the process to make electro-fishing legal for salmon monitoring purposes? Who would provide funds for electro-fishing equipment and who would pay for the monitoring? How the salmon monitoring would fit into the activities of the Belarus Academy of Sciences? The current activities of the Academy of Sciences are limited to the counting of spawning nests in two or three rivers and there are not plans/funds to do anything else.

More questions of similar nature were raised, but there were no sensible answers. The participants came to the conclusion that a centrally funded national salmon conservation programme would be needed. To initiate the development of such programme a working group should be set up under the auspices of the Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources. Several participants of the round table expressed their interest in being included in the working group.

Site visit

The main reason why we decided to hold the round table in Ostrovets is that it is just 15 minutes drive from the river Tartak. After presentations the participants all eager to see the spawning site jumped in two mini-buses and were driven off to Tartak. Because the spawning season was over we did not see any spawning fish, but the spawning nests were clearly identifiable. And of course the beaver dam was still there already repaired by these tireless animals. Vatslav Blazhevich gave us a good tour around the Tartak. The site visit was concluded with the

group photograph taken on the bank of the river Vilia near where it meets with Tartak.

Next steps

In the end of December 2007 I was presented at the meeting of the Public Environmental Council, which I am a member of, under the Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources. I thought it was a good opportunity to meet with the Minister and to inform him personally about the conclusions of the round table. But the Minister was not there and the round table conclusions were given to the Deputy Minister Mrs Ludmilla Volchuga who apart from other things is looking after biodiversity. In January 2008 the round table conclusions were officially sent to the Ministry on behalf of the NGO Eco-Dom. The ball is now in the government's court.

Nina Palutskaya
January 2008



Persons on the photo:
Participants of the Round Table in Ostrovets (Belarus) 14 Dec. 2007

Top line - **Victor Svillo** Deputy Head of the Ostrovets Administration, **Nataly Senjuts** – specialist of the Ostrovets Educational Department, **Sergy Zhukousky** – head of the Ostrovets Environmental Protection Committee, **Irina Barschevskaya** – head of the Fish Stock Management Section of the Department of Drainage and Water Management of the Ministry of Agriculture, **Joseph Velkoshinsky** – Head of the Smorgon State Environmental Protection Committee, **Pavel Kharitonau** - minibus driver, **Igor Malevich** – specialist of the Grodno Oblast Wildlife Inspection, **Tamara Barsuk** – Head of Department of the State Wildlife Protection Inspectorate, **Nataly Kozenko** main specialist of the Fish Stock Resources Department of the Ministry of Nature Resources and Environmental Protection of Belarus.

Down line - **Vladimir Marchenko** – head of the Smorgon Wildlife Inspection, **Nina Palutskaya**, the CCB project leader, **Dr Vitautas Kesminas**, Head of Laboratory of the Institute Ecology of Vilnius University, **Dr. Michael Plutae** – research scientist of the Academy of Sciences of Belarus, Minsk, **Vaclav Bladzevich** – local resident, **Andrey Kishkurno** – ecological activist from Minsk.