

Our View

Janice Riley, March 18, 2024

The article “DMF to Assess Herring Spawning Ponds” in the March 13 edition of your newspaper could leave readers with a false impression of Brewster’s Slough Pond herring passage by Warden Doug Erickson. I will address a few inaccuracies here, but a full commentary, and record of the migratory year, can be found on my citizen science website “pondlore.com.”

I have lived on Slough Pond for 22 years and have studied the life cycle of river herring extensively, after having worked with my friend John Hay on a documentary on his book “The Run” in 2001. I have seen otters fishing here and it is a joyful sight. I have seen heron and eagles and osprey fishing here. I call that the circle of life. I have never seen evidence of otters and raccoons “slaughtering” stranded herring; I counted eight predations and fourteen lost to human error. I have seen high predation at the fish ladder. Stony Brook is a vibrant ecosystem and the migration of this keystone species sustains its life.

I understand people have different worldviews, but public perception on issues is shaped by public comment. Sound observations and scientific data can help inform decisions on issues as critical as our ecosystems, and that is exactly what the DMF study can provide.

In his comments, Warden Erickson mentioned that the pond level is lower than it was last year; it is considerably higher. He also stated that the Slough Pond passage had lost its water by April 6 last year. In fact, the water level was deep enough for hundreds of adult herring to migrate through the passage into Slough Pond on April 16 and 19, and May 1, 2, 3, 4, and 30. The alewives adapt to changes in the water level as rainfall fluctuates. If maintenance of the passage had not been neglected for several years, accumulated sand and debris would not have inhibited their passage.

Erickson refers to the passage as a “ditch” (elsewhere, a “dried up ditch”), which suggests that it is an inconsequential and irrelevant migratory route. Runs all across the Cape are in old cranberry “ditches” created in wetlands modified for farming. The Slough passage has been a viable migration route for at least 75 years, most likely many more. It is typical for all such passages, whether manmade or natural, and ponds, to lose water levels in the summer.

Slough Pond has been the natal or home pond for generations of alewives. 2023 was ultimately a successful year, with thousands of alewives born in Slough Pond, however, it was also a year of intense effort to persuade the Alewife Committee and Natural Resources Department to do their due diligence. The manpower issue was easily addressed by successfully partnering with AmeriCorps in the fall. Fry nurtured in the Slough Pond nursery were then able to emigrate out to sea from September through December. This passage, like many across the Cape, requires a different level of oversight than the fish ladder.

The head warden has stated his opinion that the passageway should be closed, not restored. It seems clear that closing a habitat is not the way to protect the herring, proper management is. I have yet to see the science that supports that decision when towns across New England are working diligently on restoration efforts for the declining herring population. Science shows that river herring not only require but seek out a diversity of nursery habitats to ensure a healthy population. Closing off this habitat would have consequential effects on the entire ecosystem, including the already degraded water quality of Walker's Pond and Lower Mill Pond, both subject to eutrophication. Slough is the cleanest pond in Brewster and one of the healthiest on the Cape, with significant influence as a headwater pond on the Stony Brook Watershed.

It is a sign of the progress we have made in the past year that it is now on the public record that the Alewife Committee will support the Division of Marine Fisheries habitat and nursery study for the next two years before making any decisions on closure. Led by biologist Brad Chase, the study was commissioned by the Natural Resources Advisory Commission. Along with the DMF study, there is a three-year study underway by the Cape Cod Ponds Network, an initiative of the Cape Cod Commission and the APCC (the Brewster Ponds Coalition and the Town collect data annually). It is our hope these studies, conducted by well-respected professionals, better positioned to inform our own perspective on habitats, biodiversity, and ecosystems, will inform our Alewife Committee with responsible models of stewardship on behalf of the citizens of Brewster. As NOAA states, "River herring restoration is not a fisheries management issue, it is an ecosystem management issue."