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Salmon return to France's River Seine

Atlantic salmon have returned to France's River Seine after an absence of nearly a century, with hundreds swimming past the Eiffel Tower and Notre Dame cathedral this year.



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Historically, the Seine hosted a flourishing population of salmon Photo: GETTY

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The reappearance of salmon and other species chased from these waters by dams and pollution is all the more remarkable because no efforts have been made to reintroduce them. They came back on their own.

"There are more and more fish swimming up the Seine," said Bernard Breton, a top official at France's National Federation for Fishing. "This year the numbers have exceeded anything we could have imagined: I would not be surprised if we had passed the 1,000 mark," he said.

2008 was already a record-breaking year, with at least 260 tallied on a video system in the fish passage of the Poses dam above Rouen, a city roughly half way between Paris and the Atlantic Ocean.

Historically, the Seine hosted a flourishing population of salmon, a migratory species that return from the sea between December and June to their freshwater birth place to reproduce.

But the construction of dams, and especially the fouling of the Seine with chemical runoff from industry and agriculture along with organic pollution, led to their local extinction sometime between the First World War and Second World War.

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Today, *Salmo salar*, or Atlantic salmon, is listed as a threatened species throughout Europe. But a weekend angler reeled a six-kilo (13-pound) specimen just downstream from Paris at the end of last month while last October at Suresnes, also downstream from the city gates, a fisherman snagged an even bigger one, the first such catch in over seven decades.

Salmon are not the only fish in the Seine making a comeback. In 1995, only four species were known to swim its waters - eels, redeye, bream and carp - and at least one of these is invasive.

Today there are at least 32, according to the water purification authority for the larger Paris region. The lamprey eel, sea trout and shad have all joined salmon in the Seine over the last few years.

The reason, say scientists, is simple: cleaner water. In the mid-1990s, "between 300 and 500 tonnes of fish died in the Seine up river from Paris every year because of pollution," said Breton.

But massive efforts over the last 15 years, including a new water purification plant, have removed much of the river's pollutants. The results suggest that when it comes to conservation, restoring an ecosystem is probably a better strategy than restocking depleted waters, notes Breton.



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