

Eastern Maine's Groundfish Revival Seen Tied To Rivers

by Ted Ames

Eastern Maine's greatest economic opportunity lies in rebuilding its fisheries. It starts with the Penobscot....

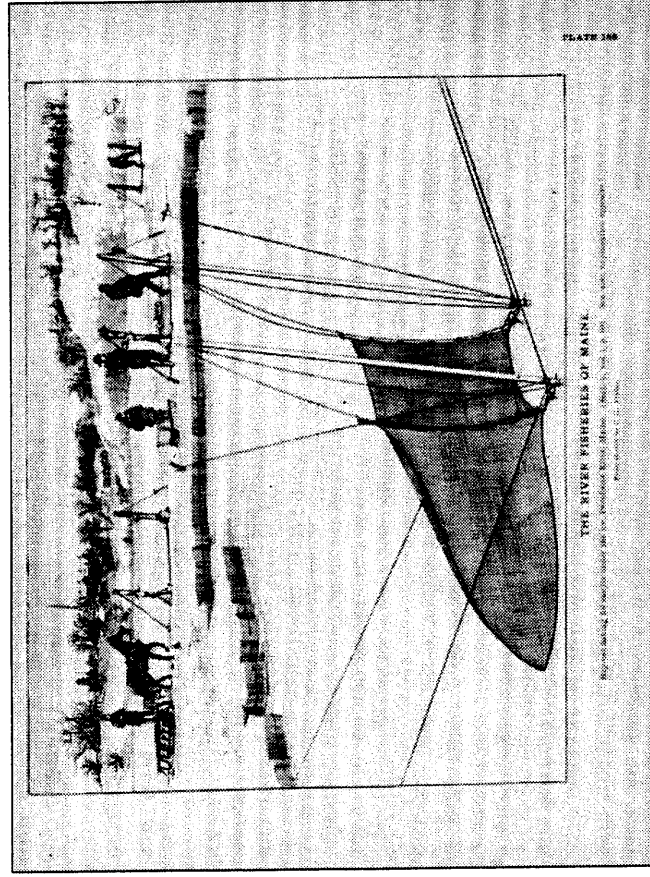
In the past, the goal of rebuilding the state's depleted fisheries has seemed impossible. But times have changed. Scientists have learned much about fish behavior

This could be the secret to make groundfishing in Maine a world-class fishery again.

and ecology and now have tools that could restore Maine's once-prolific fisheries, and that could revitalize the economy of communities bordering Maine's rivers and coast. At the same time, this would increase biological diversity and generate many new jobs in remote areas.

Does this sound too good to be true? Perhaps not.

The first step starts with an opportunity that literally runs through the middle of the state. That is reopening the Penobscot River to anadromous runs of fish; and over time, repeating this with other watersheds. Right now, the once famous stocks of cod, haddock and flounder—the groundfish—are severely depleted in Eastern Maine. Restoring sea-run



Sea-run fish migrating up Maine rivers were once a powerful economic driver that generated thousands of sustainable, year-round jobs throughout the state. That potential is still there. The only thing needed to bring back sea-run fish is to remove a couple of dams and let them in. The fish will do the rest.

forage stocks, such as shad and alewives, will attract groundfish stocks, like the cod that prey on them, to the bays and allow the groundfish to rebuild.

The second step would be to apply the same management strategies that were used to rebuild lobster stocks to these groundfish fisheries as they recover.

Sea-run fish migrating up Maine rivers were once a powerful economic driver that generated

of thousands in a reopened River someday. But salmon are just the tip of the iceberg. Maine's rivers and streams once supported huge runs of several different kinds of fish, but only salmon could get past the dams. Before dams closed the Penobscot, there were annual spawning runs of alewives, bluebacks, and shad that numbered in the millions. Along with them were salmon, striped bass and sturgeon.

If Maine reopened its largest river and reestablished sea-run stocks, sportsmen throughout the country would swamp the area. Sustainable runs of Atlantic salmon, shad, and stripers in the Penobscot would spin off benefits to every town bordering a river. The economic boost would be tremendous.

But the key to this opportunity lies in the fact that river towns and cities would not be the only ones to benefit from the revitalized river. The adults and young alike of alewives, shad, and bluebacks are also food for groundfish like cod. The new migrations would draw thousands of groundfish back to the bay and, once again, the river would provide the extra forage base around Penobscot Bay that made it so productive in the past. This could be the

See *GROUNDFISH* on page 16

GROUNDFISH from page 15

secret to make groundfishing in Maine a world-class fishery again. But it needn't stop there. Nautical charts show that Maine's long coastline is punctuated by several large bays, all with rivers and streams emptying into them and all with a history of great fishing. Each bay had marine forage stocks of course, but the runs of alewives, shad, and bluebacks provided a huge additional food supply that drew large schools of cod, haddock, pollock, cusk, hake—and even halibut and plaice—to each bay. This made the Gulf's prolific inshore fishing grounds world-renowned. They could be made nearly as productive again.

Rivers are critical to making Maine's coastal fisheries productive. As each one became choked with dams and their huge runs of fish were lost, local inshore groundfish stocks slowly disappeared. Reopening the Penobscot River would reverse that trend and unleash a potent biological engine that could provide Mainers with a countless number of jobs.

After living and studying the long-term decline of fisheries along Maine's coast, I have to say that up to now it's been downright depressing. Forage stocks such as alewives and river herring have nearly disappeared. Groundfish abundance has dwindled along with them, until even the ubiquitous cod are uncommon from Monhegan Island to Eastport.

What bothers most, is that it's now so unnecessary.

Maine fisheries simply have not been cared for. Except for one. The Maine lobster fishery is being sustainably-fished and is doing fine. Its annual economic activity approaches a billion dollars a year and provides good jobs for more than 7,500 boats and 15,000

Back in the 1930s, Maine lobsters were nearly as scarce as salmon are today.

Maine fishermen. It's New England's most profitable fishery.

But Maine's lobster industry didn't just jump out from under a rock. It was no windfall. Back in the 1930s, Maine lobsters were nearly as scarce as salmon are today. The commissioner at the time sponsored regulations that allowed lobster stocks to rebuild. He took a lot of heat, but fishermen worked with him. By mid-century the regulations had fused with the culture of fishing towns to form a highly successful approach to management. The fishery steadily recovered, improving and stabilizing the coastal economy until today, 70-odd years later, it is Maine's premier fishery.

Federal rules threatened this approach in the 1990s. Maine responded by legislating those regulations and traditions into the highly successful Lobster Zone

System. Maine's sustainable approach to management was officially a plan. The plan relies on four basic rules:

- (1) Protecting brood stock and egg-bearing females. That ensures a new crop every year.
- (2) Protecting the young from being destroyed before they are big enough to legally catch.
- (3) Limiting how lobsters are caught to fishing a certain number of traps, thereby reducing the "gold rush" mentality and protecting marine habitats from damage.
- (4) Creating a series of zones along the coast that control entry and manage locally with elected delegates from the zone and a DMR liaison.

That plan's success shows how to restore groundfish.; opening the river shows a way to reverse ecological damage. If groundfish and herring were managed by this straight forward approach while Maine's rivers were being reopened, the productivity of Maine's coast would increase to levels unseen in a century. Granted, it would take hard work and courageous support from the state, legislators, fishermen, coastal communities, and environmentalists. All would be needed. But in the end, every town bordering a river or bay could enjoy an improved quality of life, numerous new business opportunities brought on by the abundance and species diversity generated by restoration. The Penobscot is perhaps a good place to start. J

FISHERMEN'S VOICE SUBSCRIBE TODAY!

Subscribe to the *Fishermen's Voice* and receive the newspaper packed with the latest news on current issues affecting the fishing community — conveniently delivered to your mailbox every month for just \$16 a year!

"Thanks very much for your quick response and quick shipping ... I got the paper on Thursday! Really enjoy the writing ... I don't feel any other newspaper deals with the real issues you all deal with up there on a day to day basis. Keep up the great work, and you can count on my continued support!"

— Capt. Adam Nowalsky
Port Republic, NJ

Send payment along with the information below to:

Fishermen's Voice,

PO Box 253, Gouldsboro, ME 04607

or call (207) 963-7195

Name _____

Address _____

City _____

State, Zip _____

*Canadian subscriptions are \$23.95 US dollars.