

# GloucesterTimes.com, Gloucester, MA

*September 20, 2011*

## Historic River Reclamation impacts all of New England

*Outdoors*

**Dave Sartwell**

---

The Penobscot River in Maine is on the verge of an historic reclamation. The Lower Penobscot River Restoration Project has cleared what at first seemed insurmountable opposition to removing dams and restoring the natural flow of the river. Although the implementation will take several years, all of the agreements and access to the permitting process are now in place.

Why should this be of any interest to those of us that live on Cape Ann? The Penobscot River is the second largest river in New England, draining about one-third of Maine. It was the highway for thousands of years for migrating fish seeking the terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems deep inland. Somewhere between 50,000-70,000 adult salmon used to run the river.

Then came the dams, pollution and other stresses to the watershed. And, as a result, the searun populations of sturgeon, salmon, eels, smelt, tomcod, sea lamprey, shad, alewives, blueback herring and others are at all time lows. These fish historically provided much of the food source for a whole host of migrating fish that we take here on the North Shore.

This story repeated itself all over New England on rivers such as the Merrimack, Piscataqua, Connecticut and others. There have been a number of attempts to reverse the problem, but almost all of them have been half-measures that simply have not worked. This is the first really comprehensive pact that will seriously impact the entire Penobscot water shed and the whole Gulf of Maine.

In December of 2010, after receiving all of the required federal and state permits, the Trust acquired three dams on the river...the Veazie, the Great Works and the Howland. The Veazie and Great Works are the first two dams on the river. The engineering work is done for the removal of the Veazie and Great Works dams and a bypass at the Howland.

The Great Works Dam will be the first to go down and is scheduled to be removed during the months of June-November of this coming year. The removal of the Veazie Dam will follow the next year. If the funding falls in place, the Howland bypass will occur at the same time as the dam removal. A fishlift will be installed at the Milford site.

This project will restore nearly 1,000 miles of historic habitat. Many streams that feed the river will start seeing migrating fish that will be no longer blocked from their waters. Sixty to 70 percent of all United States Atlantic salmon spawn in the Penobscot. However, only 3 percent of the river's historic spawning habitat lies below the Veazie Dam. Just over 3,000 salmon came to the dam this year, a bit of an uptick in numbers. Imagine them all swimming up stream for miles, seeking out just the right spot to spawn.

Several species including striped bass, both species of Sturgeon and rainbow smelt will regain their entire historical habitat. This project will improve access to hundreds of miles of river and dozens of lakes and ponds that historically provided habitat for shad, alewife, blueback herring and American eel. Federal biologists believe alewife runs could increase from a few thousand to several million, and American shad from near zero to 1.5 million annually.

Now imagine all of the other species that we do not often think about that will use this opened riverway. How many young ones will emerge from their eggs, live in the river and then float downstream and into the Gulf. Now imagine all of the life forms that will feed on the nutrient-rich water that will pour out into the ocean unabated, feeding the thousands of other life forms that await. Flood Debris:

We were cruising along just east of the Essex River entrance, watching for the birds that would lead us to schools of bait, when Steve saw something in the water dead ahead. He waved me to the right and we eased on by a huge landscape timber just bobbing along in the water. If we had hit that piece at high speed it would have pierced our hull with no problem.

We have had some extremely high water floods in the northern New England over the past few weeks. As a result, a lot of very large debris including tree trunks, large limbs, and other detritus have washed down rivers like the Merrimack and the Piscataqua and floated out into the ocean.

Bob Adriance of BoatUS says, "The fact is that small boats moving at high speeds can be sunk easily by striking a submerged object, whether it's a tree, parts of buildings, fences, or other debris washed down by recent storms. It is really a problem for any boat as running gear and outdrives can be damaged and lead to water coming in."

There are a couple of precautions you can take to avoid problems at sea. First is just be extra cautious. Try to have everyone on board be more aware of the possible dangers in the water and keep on the lookout. This is doubly true at night.

If you do hit something, stop the boat and really check out the hull for damage. Before you leave the dock make sure your bilge pump and the area around it are free and clear.

Be sure you have an extra bucket or two in case of a puncture to the hull. Carry a few wooden bungs to plug up round holes. A couple of towels jammed into a crack can help as well. A couple of precautions before hand can avoid disaster on the water.