

# Kennebec shad runs positive for Penobscot

As fishing outings go, Tuesday evening's jaunt on the Kennebec River lacked a few of the features that most anglers typically prefer.

This was not a trip to the back-of-beyond, where getting there is half the fun, and where encountering another fisherman would have been a surprise.

Instead, this was urban fishing at its finest, and a quick glance around proved it.

Nearby — two or three well-placed casts across an expansive, paved parking lot, perhaps — was the massive building that formerly housed the Hathaway Shirt Co. A few hundred yards from that? Waterville's bustling Main Street.

On Tuesday, none of that mattered. Andrew Goode and I weren't on the Kennebec for peace and quiet. We weren't there to escape civilization.

Instead, we were there, sharing Goode's square-stern canoe, to learn more about the Kennebec's varied fishery and take advantage of an opportunity that wouldn't have existed even a decade ago.

We wanted to catch a shad.

Goode is the vice president of U.S. programs for the Atlantic Salmon Federation, and as his title suggests, he's an avid salmon fisherman.

But his group is also a key stakeholder in the cooperative Penobscot River Restoration Project, and he realizes that in

order for "his" fish to do well, other species must thrive.

Other species like shad.

"I think one of the problems has been this single-species focus with Atlantic salmon in these rivers in Maine," Goode said, taking a break from fly-casting. "In a project like [the Penobscot



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River Restoration Project], where we're focused on all the different fish there, we're recognizing that these fish live all together in the river and depend on each other and if you focus on one, you're not going to be successful. To restore salmon, you've got to restore the river."

Billed as one of the most ambitious river restoration projects in U.S. history, the Penobscot effort calls for removing two dams and providing fish passage at a third.

On the Kennebec, a major obstacle to fish passage was removed a decade ago when the Edwards Dam in Augusta was demolished.

With additional habitat available, sea-run fish began heading upriver and reaching spots that hadn't been accessible for generations.

Places like Lockwood Dam in Waterville.

"A lot of [good shad habitat], their historical spawning habitat in the Kennebec was above the Edwards Dam," Goode said. "The state was stocking shad before the dam ever came out, upriver. We're a little farther behind on the Penobscot. We're not stocking any shad at the moment. There are still some shad in the Penobscot [and biologists] are trying to figure out [how many] now."

The parallel to the Penobscot is clear: Both the Kennebec and the Penobscot are large river systems with historic runs of shad that have been interrupted by the presence of dams.

Shad return from the ocean to spawn and can reach eight pounds or more. They're fun to catch, attack flies readily, and in places where there are significant runs — the Connecticut, Hudson and Merrimac rivers, for instance — sport fisheries and shad festivals are common.

"You see pictures below the Veazie Dam of all the boats during the heyday of the salmon fishery. That's what those shad fisheries look like when you go to some of these other rivers," Goode said. "There's just boats anchored one right after the other."

Goode said it's difficult to get  
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an accurate population assessment on shad in the Kennebec, but said the number of returnees is surely in the tens of thousands per year.

One veteran shad angler and his fishing partners caught 30 shad on the Kennebec over a two-day span earlier this week in order to tag some fish for research purposes, Goode said.

Goode and I had no such luck on Tuesday, but that doesn't mean the fish weren't there. And it doesn't mean that larger, healthier runs of shad aren't on the horizon.

It just means that we were too busy fighting off the alewives to land any shad.

"If you look [at other shad rivers], if you had even 100,000 fish, you could have a really big recreational fishery," Goode said. "If you start getting up into those larger numbers, it would be one of the better shad fisheries on the East Coast. The potential's certainly there."

Goode said shad are finicky fish that are easily spooked. That trait makes them tougher to catch during bright sunlight, and makes fish lifts preferable to fish ladders at dams.

On the Penobscot, the potential for a massive shad run also exists.

"They estimate the run [historically] was over 2 million, maybe 2½ million shad," Goode said.

Most of the suitable shad habitat on the Penobscot is below the Enfield Dam, according to Goode.

The Penobscot project would open up much of that habitat to shad, and the results could be staggering.

"Under the scenario of removing Veazie and Great Works [dams] and putting a fish lift in at Milford, biologists think we could get back a run of a million to a million and a half shad over time," Goode said.

Good for the shad. Good for the anglers. But how good is the idea for the river's other species?

As it turns out, very good indeed.

Today, without a sizeable run of shad on the Penobscot, Atlantic salmon that return to the river end up facing more severe challenges than they will in the future.

"These shad are coming into the river here in May and June, it's when our big adult salmon are coming back," Goode said. "So you get all the big predators, like seals, at the mouths of these rivers, that would have nothing but salmon to prey on [now]."

Goode explained that those seals and other predators aren't necessarily looking for a salmon dinner. They're looking for *any* dinner. And when they eventually get to look at a new, improved menu, they may opt for something else.

"If they've got big numbers of shad and alewives and river herring, those fish have a higher caloric content [than salmon]," Goode said. "They're an oily fish, and they tend to become the preferred prey. So there's a lot of benefits for Atlantic salmon by having shad in the river."

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