

OUTDOORS

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More dam removals needed to continue Atlantic salmon resurgence

When John Burrows started out with the Atlantic Salmon Federation a decade ago, public support for dam removal was minimal and government funding was rich, he told a room full of fly fishing brethren last week. These days, he said, the opposite is true.

But just as hard economic times are starting to pinch salmon restoration, something incredible is happening: The salmon are starting to return.

Burrows, director of the New England Programs for Atlantic Salmon Federation, rallied his Trout Unlimited friends Tuesday night to help advocate for dam removal in southern Maine. Because it's working, Burrows said.

"This year they were found



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in the East Branch of the Penobscot River. It's the first time in 25-plus years Atlantic salmon swam in the shadow of Katahdin," Burrows said.

This year, 63 wild Atlantic salmon returned to spawn in the Kennebec River, compared to 16 five years ago. In the Saco River, 94 returned, compared to 29 five years ago. And in the Penobscot River, the numbers are 3,123 compared to 1,469. It was the third best year for returns in that prized salmon

water in 35 years of passing fish at the Veazie Dam, Burrows said.

But with changing economic times, Burrows said, fishermen and fishing groups need a call to arms. So he stood before his Trout Unlimited chapter in Portland and asked them to join the federation's newest effort to remove the first three dams on the Mousam River in Kennebunk.

The Mousam has 12 dams and 340 miles of river that is inaccessible to sea-run fish, exactly 99 percent of the river, making it the least accessible Atlantic salmon river in Maine. Public support can help, said Burrows.

"I just was at a meeting for the Royal River Dam. There were 60 people there. Nobody

was saying, 'You can't take that away.' People are much more thoughtful at meetings like that than they were a decade ago," Burrows said. "Today, river restoration is not a crazy idea."

That said, Maine is behind the times.

In Pennsylvania, hundreds of dams have come down, and dozens have come down in New Hampshire, Burrows said, whereas in Maine, just 24 have been removed in the past 25 years.

"The pace is picking up. People see the benefit. It's not a foreign concept now," he said.

For years, fishermen around the Penobscot River scoffed at the moratorium on fishing for Atlantic salmon in the historic salmon pools.

But when you read the information brochures put out by the federation and the reasons for trying to save *Salmo salar*, which means "leaper," and then hear it's working, this movement draws people in.

Atlantic salmon adorn the earliest art, found on cave drawings in France that date to 25,000 years ago. It's a part of the mythology of Scotland and Ireland. And as the ASF points out, many First Nation communities settled along Atlantic salmon rivers.

The fighting game fish always has been impressive. A record 83-pound salmon was caught in Ireland in 1882, according to the federation. North America's largest recorded Atlantic salmon was a 55-pound fish caught

on Quebec's Grand Caspédia River in 1939.

There are several fish passages the federation is focused on restoring and dams it hopes to remove. If the trend of growing salmon numbers can continue for five to 10 years, Burrows said, taking the fish off the Endangered Species List could be up for discussion.

"It can happen, but not for another decade. In the '70s and '80s there were 3,000 to 4,000 fish returning to the Penobscot. To have a wild fishery, a lot more hard work needs to happen, Burrows said.

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