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OUR OPINION

River restorers reach milestone in balancing act

A healthy river is not only a home for fish, and its banks are not only a home for the animals that prey on those fish. It isn't only a source of hydropower, a playground for anglers or a conveyor belt for industry. A healthy river, instead, performs a much bigger function: It moves energy back and forth from the forest to the ocean. The ocean fertilizes the river's inland reaches; the forest sends food down to the ocean.

Migratory fish — everything from alewives to eels to Atlantic salmon — eat food in the ocean and use that energy to move upstream. Then, they're eaten by animals along the river's course (raccoons, mink, osprey, eagles). They discharge nutrients in their urea and spawn. Their carcasses decompose and provide additional nutrients to the river system. And so, marine energy and nutrients are moved upstream.

Likewise, a river will send sediments and organic debris downstream, fertilizing the river bottom and, ultimately, the mouth of the river and the ocean into which it flows. It also will send juvenile fish downstream, many of which will be eaten by ocean fish. Thus, inland energy and nutrients move downstream, feeding the ocean and its myriad species.

PENOBSCOT UNHEALTHY

Without those migratory fish to do the moving, though, a healthy river can't function in this way. And it has been a long time since Maine's Penobscot River has been a healthy river.

Once filled to the brim with native migratory species such as alewives, shad and Atlantic salmon, the damming of the river — New England's second largest — has barred those native species from their upriver spawning grounds and, without the ability to spawn, their populations have since plummeted. Scientists say that the decline of native migratory fish in the Penobscot has also diminished marine species that rely on them in the Gulf of Maine and diminished bird and mammal populations along the river. The Penobscot Indian tribe, for whom the river's banks have been home for more than 10,000 years, say this decline has robbed them of their birthright.

(cont.)

LAST CHANCE FOR SALMON

REVERSAL POSSIBLE

But with the recent announcement that \$25 million in private and public money had been raised to buy three dams along the river, that sorry situation appears to be ripe for reversal.

In a riverside celebration in late 2003, a coalition of government agencies, tribal and conservation groups announced that they had struck a deal with energy company PPL Maine to buy and remove the two lowermost dams on the Penobscot — Veazie and Great Works — and purchase and decommission a third, the Howland Dam, where a bypass would be built to allow migratory fish passage.

It was one of the largest and most ambitious river-restoration plans in the country, reconnecting the forest to the ocean via the river. It promised to restore the river to health and at the same time result in virtually no net loss of power generation, as PPL Maine would be granted permission to increase power generation at other dams it owns in the Penobscot watershed.

This would be a new kind of dam removal, where industry and conservation interests and government worked hand in hand to answer ecological and economic imperatives.

The restoration project is considered the last, best chance for Atlantic salmon to rebound from the edge of extinction; restoration of smaller rivers just wasn't producing results that could sustain a significant population of salmon.

The deal, if accomplished, would open access to nearly 1,000 miles of spawning habitat. Several of the river's species, including stripers, rainbow smelt and two species of sturgeon would regain their entire historic habitat. Dozens of upriver lakes and ponds would re-open to spawning alewives, shad and blueback herring. And the restoration project is considered the last, best chance for Atlantic salmon to rebound from the edge of extinction; restoration of smaller rivers just wasn't producing results that could sustain a significant population of salmon.

But \$50 million had to be raised to make the project happen — \$25 million to buy the dams, another \$25 million for removal and fish bypass construction.

Fundraisers got to work. It wasn't an easy job — as one of them said, it's easy to get people to donate thousands to buy a piece of threatened land. "You can see it," they said.

But how do you show donors a river and expect them to envision both the degradation below its surface, as well as the possibility for restoration?

The Penobscot River Restoration Trust and its many partners and friends must have done something right. They managed to raise \$10 million from individuals, foundations and corporations; another \$15 million came in from the federal government. The last \$10 million of that was authorized by President Bush just this week. Next step: getting permits, conducting more in a series of community meetings for input on the plan, raising another \$25 million.

NATURE VS. ECONOMY

It is, it seems, often much easier for humans to destroy than it is to create. For generations, the Penobscot River fed both the Indian tribe that took its name from the river and the landscape of forest and ocean that surrounded it.

That connection was severed with the advent of industry and hydropower. To many, the riches that resulted were worth it. But to the river and those who loved it, it was not.

So now, a growing and determined group has set out to bring life back to the Penobscot. John Muir once said of his beloved western forests that "God has cared for these trees, saved them from drought, disease, avalanches and a thousand tempests and floods. But he cannot save them from fools."

You could call those who destroyed the Penobscot "fools" but it would be fools as well who would now decree that all industry on the river must stop to make up for that damage.

Instead, with wisdom, these river restorers have found a way to balance both nature's needs and the demands of our economy.

We — and the river — are in their debt.