

Small streams being restored to aid salmon

Massive archway installed at Harmon Brook near Calais

BY KEVIN MILLER
OF THE NEWS STAFF

In the campaign to save Maine's Atlantic salmon from the brink of extinction, rivers such as the Penobscot, Machias and Dennys often steal the limelight because of their history as top fly-fishing destinations.

So perhaps it's no surprise that the name Harmon Brook may be unfamiliar to most folks following the plight of Maine's endangered salmon. But this tributary of the East Machias River is getting some long-overdue attention through a unique cooperative project that has garnered national attention.

Harmon Brook is among 13 smaller waterways in Washington and Hancock counties that will be flowing a bit more freely this summer thanks to stream restoration programs. Coordinated by the nonprofit organization Project SHARE, the restoration programs are aimed at improving salmon habitat throughout the watersheds of the five Down East rivers with federally protected Atlantic salmon populations.

That's good news for current and future generations of young salmon that depend on clear, free-flowing streams with rocky bottoms for their survival. It's also another sign of the growing appreciation that, to be successful, Maine's efforts to

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BANGOR DAILY NEWS PHOTO BY KEVIN MILLER

A crew works Wednesday to align and secure a massive metal archway that will support a logging road over Harmon Brook, a tributary of the East Machias River that contains endangered Atlantic salmon. Two excavators, visible at the top, were used to carefully lower into place the archway, which is 56 feet long and weighs nearly 10,000 pounds.

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save the salmon have to extend beyond the major rivers.

Located about 20 miles west of Calais, Harmon Brook is a small stream that feeds the East Machias near where the river flows below Route 9. For the past 50 years, the brook has flowed through a culvert — and occasionally over or around the culvert — that passes beneath a heavily used logging road.

Such culverts may be adequate for water passage, explained Project SHARE's Steven Koenig, but they can pose real challenges to adult salmon seeking spawning grounds and their tiny offspring, not to mention brook trout and other native species. Culverts also change the dynamics of the stream, affecting downstream flow, water temperature and sediment load.

"Road culverts are designed to pass water," Koenig said while standing beside the brook Wednesday. "But we want the [natural] channel bottom to pass the water."

That was the idea this week as a large crew of construction workers, biologists, soil scientists and consultants spent several days digging up the long-buried culvert and replacing it with a more modern and environmentally sensitive approach to water passage.

The culmination came Wednesday afternoon when the construction crew carefully maneuvered a 56-foot-long metal archway weighing nearly 10,000 pounds into the stream bed.

Donald Hanscom, owner of Hanscom Construction in Marshfield, looked like a conductor in bluejeans and a hard hat as he slowly orchestrated the movements of two large excavators lifting the archway into place.

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STEVEN KOENIG,
PROJECT SHARE

Crews then bolted the archway to concrete footings, which were then covered with rocks and boulders in an attempt to replicate a natural waterway. Eventually, after the archway was covered with rock and dirt, Harmon Brook once again flowed freely and the logging road was reopened to traffic.

"If it's done right like this, the road is invisible to the stream," said Jason Czapiga with the Maine Bureau of Sea Run Fisheries and Habitat, formerly known as the Maine Atlantic Salmon Commission.

Glancing down at the stream, Czapiga said Harmon Brook offers salmon and brook trout good habitat. Underscoring that point, he and biologists with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service carefully trapped about 40 young salmon found in the immediate construction area.

The fish, which were all a year or two old, were relocated to other parts of the stream. Czapiga said that without genetic analysis, it's impossible to tell whether the young salmon were of wild origin or were from hatchery stock.

But their age proves that, regardless of their genetic lineage, young salmon can survive in Harmon Brook. The newly restored stream bed should only make the stream even more livable, Koenig said.

Project SHARE, which stands for Salmon Habitat and River Enhancement, is a coalition of landowners, anglers, businesses and government agencies focusing on salmon issues in Down East Maine. What makes the organization unique, said Koenig, is the group's executive director, is the leading role that landowners played in seeking habitat improvements.

"It was the landowners who said that this was important," Koenig said while motioning to the restored stream bed, which was located on land managed by Wagner Forest Management.

Koenig, who often works as the liaison between landowners and government agencies, has helped coordinate a dozen more restoration projects planned for this summer.

About 75 percent of the funding came from the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service. Most of the remaining funds come from settlements negotiated by the Maine Department of Environmental Protection and the landowners. Project SHARE's approach to habitat restoration has earned

national recognition. Last year, the deputy secretary of the U.S. Department of the Interior said such collaborative efforts are key to addressing complicated natural resources issues. And Koenig received a "cooperative conservation" award from the NRCS earlier this year.

Nathan Pennell recalled Wednesday how he used to see numerous large, adult salmon wriggle their way up Harmon Stream from the East Machias during spawning season.

Adult salmon haven't been seen in the brook in about 20 years. But Pennell, who works with Project SHARE in his capacity as district manager of the Washington County Soil and Water Conservation District, was optimistic about the future of the brook and Maine salmon in general.

"It's good to see progress happening, to see something on the ground that is really making a difference," said Pennell, who is also an avid fisherman. "We are on our way to restoring them. We just need more time and resources."