

The
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Decommissioning dams
The Penobscot's song
A river is brought to life again

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THE



Here's to eco-tourism

Penobscot river takes its name from the Penobscot nation, the American-Indian tribe whose ancestral lands lie along its banks. It is the largest river in Maine and the second-largest in New England. For thousands of years the tribe lived along, and off, the river, eating its fish, canoeing on it and performing ceremonies to honour it. Its clear water flowed freely. Only storms, droughts or beaver dams interrupted its flow. That changed with the arrival of European immigrants, who built more than 100 dams for timber and, later, for mills and power plants.

The Great Works dam in Bradley, Maine has blocked the river for almost two centuries. But on June 11th it began to be demolished, a first step in opening up 1,000 miles of river. The project is a collaboration between business, conservation groups, state and federal agencies, and the Penobscot nation. The removal is part of the Penobscot River Restoration Trust, a \$62m public-private project, which also involves removing the Veazie dam in 2013 and helping fish to get through at two other dams.

This last is important. The wild Atlantic salmon, which once spawned in the Penobscot, has had difficulty making its way up river. Only 3,000 now remain of a population that used to number 75,000, and many of those come from hatcheries. The river's anglers traditionally sent the first salmon caught each year to the president, but the last time this was done was in 1992, to George Bush senior. The Penobscot tribe, which has unlimited rights to fish, has taken only two salmon out of the river since 1980. Other fish populations have fallen, too. Birds and animals who fed on the river have disappeared. Opening up the dam will allow the Penobscot to flow freely from Old Town to the ocean for the first time in generations, which will make the journey easier for the salmon and ten other migratory fish, including alewives, shad, sturgeon and blue-black herring.

America's north-east has a fragmented river system, with seven dams interrupting every 100 miles of river. But not everyone agrees that this is damaging. Paul LePage, Maine's governor, a fan of hydropower, wants more dams, not fewer. He called removing the Great Works dam "irresponsible". But energy production on the Penobscot should not fall. Two other dams have been upgraded to fill the gap.

Ken Salazar, the secretary of the interior, who attended the ceremony celebrating the demolition, said that deciding between job-creation and caring for the planet is a "false choice". Eric Schwaab, of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, which has given \$20.9m to the project, calls it vital not just to the health of the river, but to the commercial and recreational fishing it supports. Although no full economic analysis has been done, the US Fish and Wildlife Service estimates that opening up the river will inject more than \$500m into the local economy. It should also bring jobs in eco-tourism.

A tribal elder, who carved a salmon spear years ago, hopes soon to employ it for the first time. He prays that “as the river becomes free-flowing again, it will sing the ancient songs as it dances over the falls, rapids and sandbars that also have been reborn.” The salmon may feel a more modified rapture.

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