



Three Dams

Compromise, commitment and cash have put a river group in position to remove three major obstacles to fish migration.

More than a decade of rampant personal greed, leading to the worst recession since the 1930s, has transformed the U.S. into a place where individuals now demand miraculous, rapid recovery with no personal pain; and Congress responds by turning compromise into an obscene word. Can we ever escape this nightmare and learn again to talk with civility to one another, practice sacrifice for the good of everyone and, with mutual trust, negotiate an improved path for our country?

Here on the banks of the Penobscot River we have proved that all of this is not only possible, but also that it can lead to an outcome that benefits all. On December 20, 2010, PRRT took ownership of three major dams—the Veazie, Howland and Great Works. The two closest to the ocean will be removed and the third will be bypassed by a river-like channel around the decommissioned dam.

A decade ago, the likelihood that the Penobscot River would now be undergoing a titanic restoration was inconceivable to all but ASF's Andy Goode, and a few other forward-looking river conservationists. ASF, the Penobscot Indian Nation, numerous federal and state agencies, and PPL—the corporation that owns the Veazie, Howland and Great Works dams—chose a path of dedication, inclusive negotiation

and flat-out hard work to construct a plan that involved major compromises. But, in the end, it would provide benefits for a river and the surrounding communities.

ASF was among seven conservation organizations that formed a coalition to hammer out a landmark plan to both open up nearly 1,000 miles of river habitat to vastly improve migration and reproductive potential for 11 sea-run fish, and at the same time maintain or increase the hydro-power capacity of the river. How did this group accomplish this win-win solution?

The name of the group—Penobscot River Restoration Trust—provides a clue. Above all else, the negotiating parties needed to develop trust in one another's motives and commitments for finding a solution. That trust eventually produced a plan that is receiving praise from around the world.

Some have criticized this river restoration plan as one that sacrifices hydropower for fish migration, yet the facts clearly disprove this contention. It is true that three dams will be removed, but the money PPL will be paid for these dams provides the investment needed to update and improve hydro-power capacity at other sites.

When the project is complete, power generation will not be imperiled and may even increase. Without the \$24 million

raised by ASF and the other participants this would not have been possible—each side gave and each gained.

It is worth noting that many self-sacrificing players worked behind the scenes in this monumental effort. Among these are the members of the local salmon clubs who raised funds and supported the efforts while knowing that they likely will never again fly fish for Atlantic salmon in the river. Their hope is that their children or grandchildren may be offered this opportunity. Many other unsung heroes have labored in a community effort that will, in the words of U.S. Sen. Olympia Snowe, “boost our local economy, maintain energy production and strengthen this critical watershed.”

In 1912, one year after the disastrous Bangor fire, a little-known Norwegian immigrant, Karl Andersen, started a tradition that would last for more than 80 years—sending the first salmon caught from the Bangor Pool to the current president of the United States. With the restoration of the Penobscot River this cherished tradition may be possible again some day. That would be a fitting tribute to a community that favored careful compromise over gridlock.

Richard Jagels is an emeritus professor of forest biology at the University of Maine.