

BY MARTIN SILVERSTONE

AND SO IT BEGINS





PRRT (2)



Above: Butch Francis, a Penobscot Nation tribal elder, performs a traditional offering at the start of the Great Works Dam removal. Left: a bald eagle flies above the Penobscot River carrying an eel to feed young chicks at its nest. Top: In a photo taken July 13, jackhammers mounted on excavators breach the Great Works Dam.

AN UPLIFTING CEREMONY, HOSTED BY THE PENOBSCOT NATION ON A LANDMARK DAY HERALDS THE REBIRTH OF A GREAT RIVER. ALL SUMMER LONG THE GREAT WORKS DAM HAS BEEN SLOWLY DISAPPEARING. NEXT YEAR'S SALMON RUN WILL HAVE ONE LESS OBSTACLE TO OVERCOME.

SHE STOOD IN THE BACKGROUND BARELY NOTICED AT ALL. SALLY Gilbert was one of the many Penobscot River Restoration Trust's (PRRT) volunteer workers that had made this day possible. A few ASF staff who had made the trip to Maine for the event stood beside her as she shyly directed the distinguished guests down the hill to where a podium awaited. These included Chief Kirk Francis of the Penobscot Indian Nation, Congressman Mike Michaud, Congresswoman Chellie Pingree, representatives from Senator Snow and Senator Collins, Commissioner Pat Keliher, of the Maine Department of Marine Resources, Eric Schwaab, Assistant Secretary for Conservation and Management of NOAA, Ken Salazar, Secretary of the U.S. Department of the Interior, and Laura Rose Day, Executive Director of the Penobscot River Restoration Trust.

CHERYL DANGLE, PENOBSCOT RIVER RESTORATION TRUST (PRRT)

Sally may have been a little ill at ease in the presence of the high profile visitors, but they in turn seemed a bit in awe of the unique scene before them. A giant steamroller flattened a crushed stone road, which curved sharply into the river. Along it three excavators and a giant dump truck inched along. Sally Gilbert, who was part of the Bangor area artistic community and had donated much time and some of her work to help the project (including the design on the t-shirts everyone seemed to be wearing), turned to me and said simply, and completely unexpectedly, "I can't help thinking of Arthur Taylor. He would so want to be here." A few seconds later, seated on an all-wheel drive golf cart, Bill Townsend, one of the great movers and shakers of salmon conservation in Maine, and a close friend of Arthur's, brought up the tail end of the procession. Standing with Sally and seeing Bill made me think of Arthur too, and back to the many battles and all the hard work that had brought us to this moment. Arthur was here in spirit, I told Sally, and certainly he was very, very proud.

Then it began, with a slow thumping from a Penobscot First Nation drum and ended when the cowbells rang out on the riverbank. They rang and rang, almost drowning out the sound of the giant hydraulic jackhammers. The jackhammers, mounted on big excavators, were the main focus of the crowd that gathered this June 11 in Bradley, Maine, to celebrate the beginning of the Great Works Dam demolition. Yet, in many ways, the real cause for celebration was the confirmation that



Ken Salazar, Secretary of the U.S. Department of the Interior, addresses the media as construction workers begin to take down the Great Works Dam in the background. "Today is an important milestone for river conservation in America," he told those gathered to celebrate the beginning of the long awaited dam removal.



BILL COUSINGER, PHOTO



CHERYL DOUGLE, PRRT (2)



A family of ducks take advantage of newly exposed mudflats which appeared in the Penobscot following breaching of the dam (top); Children watch from the Leonard's Mills Bridge as their classmates release salmon parr into a Penobscot tributary.

reconciliation and cooperation can often win out over confrontation and hostility.

On a podium close to the water, a tribal elder from the Penobscot Indian Nation fanned smoke from a smoldering smudge of sage, tobacco and sweet grass as an offering. When Chief Francis took his place before the microphones he spoke of how the Penobscot River's once-abundant runs of salmon, shad, sturgeon, alewives, eels and smelt were nearly wiped out because dams impeded migrations to their spawning grounds. But this was a day of hope, not despair.

"Today," Francis said, "signifies the most important conservation project in our 10,000-year history on this great river that we share a name with, and that has provided for our very existence. By returning these species of fish to their historic habitat, we will see the river continue to come back to life in a major way."

One by one, the podium guests praised the spirit of compromise and cooperation that had made this day possible. "Today is an important milestone for river conservation in America," Ken Salazar told those gathered. "Through a historic partnership that exemplifies President Obama's America's Great Outdoors Initiative, we are reconnecting 1,000 miles of river, restoring vital habitat for fish and wildlife, expanding opportunities for outdoor recreation and supporting energy production, jobs, and economic growth in communities throughout Maine."

Salazar was referring to the remarkable private-public collaboration which has included Black Bear Hydro and PPL Corporation, the Penobscot Indian Nation; NOAA; U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service; American Rivers;

ASF, Maine Audubon, the Natural Resources Council of Maine; the Penobscot River Restoration Trust; The Nature Conservancy; and Trout Unlimited.

Standing on a rock in the background, in order to get a better view of the proceedings, were ASF President Bill Taylor and ASF Vice-President of U.S. Programs, Andy Goode. They seemed happy to let others bask in the lime-light. Quiet satisfaction and pride has to be the sentiment of all ASF members, as the salmon conservation group had been one of the founding members of the PRRT.

I felt it too, especially when the U.S. Department of the Interior and NOAA Fisheries pledged several million in new funding, bringing the project close to reaching the estimated \$62 million necessary for completion. ASF has been a big part of the initiative to secure the needed federal funds, along with \$25 million from foundations, businesses and private individuals. A lot of work in-river, as well as much fundraising, remains to be done, but now it was time to celebrate.

And there was much to celebrate as the project will improve access to 1,000 miles of upstream habitat for endangered Atlantic salmon. But equally important, it will provide enduring benefits to many other wildlife species, as well as to millions of people who depend on the Penobscot River for clean water and jobs.

Even as jackhammers rendered the dam into chunks of concrete and dust, the next critical steps in the project loomed ahead. The Veazie Dam—the first human obstacle that anadromous fish meet on the river—is scheduled for removal in 2013. And construction of a bypass channel around the Howland Dam, 30 miles upstream, will begin soon.



MARTIN SILVERSTONE



Claude Westfall, former president of the Penobscot Salmon Club, watches from the riverbank during the June 12 ceremony to mark the start of the Great Works Dam removal. By July 28, most of the coffer dam was gone (below).



PARR



MARTIN SILVERSTONE (2)



CHERYL DANGLE, PRRT

A young girl and her mother watch as heavy equipment is moved into position to begin removing the Great Works Dam in Bradley, Maine (top). The dam removal will benefit many species, including great blue herons (above).

For many, however, the moment belonged most to the river and its inhabitants. No one was in a better position to speak to the spiritual importance rivers have to all who rely on them for sustenance and renewal, than Chief Kirk Francis. “Today is a day that will be remembered as a most significant event in reuniting our long lost fisheries resources with their historic homeland. Bringing back these



Let the Cowbells Ring

After the excavators had begun taking down the dam, the dignitaries, volunteers and supporters gathered at the Penobscot Nation Sockalexis Hall on Indian Island for some refreshments. Bill Taylor was asked to say a few words. “Restoration of the Penobscot River is and has been a top priority for ASF for the past 13 years and this is an exciting and long awaited day,” he began.

I felt a lump in my throat and couldn’t hold back, it was either cry or cheer. I still had my cowbell so I rang it as hard as I could. Throughout the hall, others joined in. The cowbells had been a small but wonderful idea, allowing everyone to express their joy at the thought of Atlantic salmon moving freely up the Penobscot after so many years of decline. Back at the riverbank, children had handed them out to the spectators and to those watching from a viewpoint above the dam. Like many parts of this project, it was just another little, but significant piece contributed by an unknown volunteer. A few weeks after the ceremony, I bumped into Bill Townsend in an old log cabin on the Miramichi River. We reminisced over the memorable day and I wondered out loud who had the great idea of the cowbells. He told me that he too had wondered who had thought this up, so when he got the chance after the ceremonies he had asked Laura Rose Day whose idea it was.

“Don’t you remember?” she asked the long-time Maine salmon defender. “It was yours!”

lost relatives continues the restoration of ancient natural cycles of creation in a river we have been connected to for thousands of years, and makes us who we are as a people.”

And as it turned out, it was also a time to note the contribution of the thousands of volunteers, past and present, who had helped this day become a reality. Volunteers like Sally Gilbert and Arthur Taylor, reunited here in spirit, as a great river is reborn. 🐟