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**Penobscot River future tied to past**

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Editor's Note: As part of a research project investigating the history, ecology, and science of the Penobscot River, Catherine Schmitt paddled the river from Howland to Penobscot Bay in the late summer and early fall this year. The following is the first in a two-part series describing her trip.

Part I: River of Islands

BY CATHERINE SCHMITT

SPECIAL TO THE NEWS

Aug. 9, 2005 - A friend has tipped me off about a good place to launch off Route 116, just downstream from where the Piscataquis River empties into the Penobscot. We carry the red canoe down the bank, being careful to avoid poison ivy, and slip the boat into the quiet water. As we push off from the rocky shore, I notice that the current is slow but the river seems high for this time of year.

What do we know about this river that we barely notice on our daily rush from place to place? There are plans to restore the lower river. What will change when the dams come down and what will stay the same? I wanted to see the river for myself, so that there might be a way to know what the river has reclaimed when it again flows free. As my friend Eric and I paddled the river one reach at a time, from late summer to early fall, the river revealed itself. This is one of its stories.

Like all rivers, the Penobscot has its history, culture, economy, and ecology. And like most rivers, its flow from the headwaters in the Northern Forest to where it empties into the Gulf of Maine is not without obstacles: 116 dams in the watershed slow down the water and block fish trying to pass from woodland stream to ocean and back again.

But unlike many rivers, the Penobscot has hope: grand plans to remove the two lowermost dams and improve fish passage at other dams, while only losing a tiny fraction of energy supply. This isn't just about fish; it's also about restoring balance to the natural food chain and improving water quality. Communities along the Penobscot's banks are ready to celebrate a river which for so long has been shunned, ignored, and taken for granted.

As we begin a leisurely float to Passadumkeag, the Howland Dam on the Piscataquis River mouth fades from view. Instead of installing a fish lift or ladder, engineers are trying to think like fish, proposing to bypass the Howland Dam with a constructed channel that will mimic a natural river bend; this is how the salmon, shad and alewives are to make their way around the dam that will remain in place. It's not an easy task - the bypass has to be built around the existing dam structures while avoiding the contaminated soils beneath the old Pine Tree Tanning factory.

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It's hot, near 90 degrees, and quiet. Cardinal flowers splatter the shore with red blossoms. The river is so shallow I can see the pebbles and cobbles on the bottom. Wild celery and leafy riverweed wave gently in the clear water. Long ropes of dark green algae twist in the current, and a murky scum coats the bottom in some places. I wonder how polluted the water is.

The river is cleaner than it used to be. Forty years ago, paddling down the lower Penobscot would not be such a pleasant trip. Pulp and paper mills, tanneries, woolen mills, and riverside towns dumped their waste into the river, which could not even meet the minimum water quality standards. The riverbed was covered with sewage bacteria and the community of animals on the bottom was restricted to pollution-tolerant worms, leeches, and midge larvae. Research projects in the 1970s and 1980s were able to document improvements in water quality that resulted from the Clean Water Act of 1972, a law championed by Maine's own Sen. Ed Muskie. After mills and towns upgraded waste treatment, pollutant loads to the river decreased by 80 percent and the animal community responded.

But the river is still a long way from home, and the algae we see are evidence of this. In 2002, the levels of nitrogen and phosphorus entering the river from mills and wastewater treatment plants led Paul Mitnik of the Maine Department of Environmental Protection to conclude that "eutrophication on the Penobscot, although not severe, could be approaching levels of concern that may prove to be an issue in the future." In 2004, during routine sampling, the Penobscot Indian Nation discovered a bluish green bloom of cyanobacteria that stretched all the way from Dolby Pond on the West Branch to Belfast. Toxics remain a problem; the DEP tells us not to eat the fish from the Penobscot because they are full of dioxin, PCBs, and mercury.

"The only pure water in the river is the tears shed by our ancestors," says Butch Philips of the Penobscot Nation.

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Aug. 23 - We launch at Passadumkeag. The river is wider and shallower, braiding around sandy islands fringed in pickerelweed and ferns. Sunlight breaks through leaves and falls like silver where river meets island. I want to get out of the canoe and walk beyond the great arched galleries of maple and birch. But I stay put. A sign posted on a tree declares the island to be one of many that are part of the Penobscot Nation Reservation, which also includes the river bed and surrounding water.

The boat drifts on. We zigzag from island to island, each with its own assemblage of tree, fern, and stone. Near Craig Island, fishermen in two boats leisurely cast their lines, probably for smallmouth bass, which were introduced to the Penobscot in the 1800s and are now the top resident gamefish in the lower river. Near Fiddler Island, a bald eagle flies from a white pine on the left bank. At the tip of Grass Island, a great blue heron stalks fish, oblivious to the canoe. A large flock of Canada geese takes flight beneath two eagles high overhead. We let the current take the canoe, wander into the shallows, and pause in the shade.

Near White Squaw and Freese islands, worn pyramids of rock and wood rise out of the river, relics of the logging era on the Penobscot. In 1837, there were 250 sawmills on the river and its tributaries. Log booms in this part of the river could enclose 600 acres of logs each measuring two feet across. But a small percentage of the logs sank before they reached their destination; an estimated 400 million board feet of lumber were left on the bottom of the river. All we see is a stray log sticking out of the water, looking like a swimming beaver or otter until we get closer and realize it's just the soggy end of an old dead tree.

The edges of the islands bristle with pickerelweed, bur-reed, arrowhead, and bulrushes. Sand beaches are embossed with tiny animal tracks. The river bottom is covered with mussels; the Penobscot has all 10 of the freshwater mussel species

that occur in Maine, but I don't know what kind these are. They are peeling bronze coins half-buried in mud.

The river deepens. Fluorescent green ribbons of underwater vegetation wave like a mermaid's hair in the black water. Just above Orson Island, where the Stillwater branch wanders west, the ledges begin. These black-jagged rocks are the origin of the name Penobscot, roughly translated as waters of descending ledge. Since the glaciers receded 12,000 years ago, the river meandered east and west, through layers of till and old ocean floor, before finding its current course. The river cut all the way down to the bone, visible in the bedrock-based waterfalls and rapids and ledge-lined shores.

Entering the channel west of Indian Island, the river slows, the air quiets as if a clock had stopped ticking. A man is fishing. A bald eagle flies from pine to pine. There on the shore of Indian Island, curved like the back of a turtle, is first ledge. And a little bit farther downstream is the 20-foot dropoff of the Milford Dam. We paddle over to the west bank and take out at the Old Town boat launch.

Tuesday: River of Dams, River of Defiance.

Catherine Schmitt is a science writer with Maine Sea Grant and the Senator George J. Mitchell Center for Environmental and Watershed Research. For more information about the 2005 Penobscot River trips and research pertaining to the proposed dam removals, see <http://www.pearl.maine.edu/windows/penobscot/index.htm>.

#### PHOTO BY CATHERINE SCHMITT

Between Howland and Passadumkeag, long twisted ropes of algae wave in the current. Water quality in the Penobscot River has improved dramatically, however, over the last 30 years.

In 1837, there were 250 sawmills on the river and its tributaries

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