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## VIEWPOINTS

### SPORTS

## Fewer dams let Penobscot River flow

Tuesday, December 27, 2005 - Bangor Daily News << Back

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 of 2005. The following is the second in a two-part series describing her trip.

Part II: River of Dams,  
River of Defiance

BY CATHERINE SCHMITT

### SPECIAL TO THE NEWS

Milford and Gilman Falls dams were built around 1905 by the Bodwell Water Power Company. Together, they create a 235-acre impoundment that extends upstream for three miles, encompassing several islands including Indian, Orono and Orson Islands.

Milford Dam was built on natural falls formed by water flowing over ledge. The falls marked the limit for some migrating fish such as sturgeon, striped bass and rainbow smelt. Other fish such as shad were slowed by the challenge of surmounting the ledges and hung out in the rips east of French Island while gathering the strength to make the journey upstream.

Old maps and Native American place names tell us where fish used to be, offering a good starting point for scientists who are researching the historical ranges of fish, trying to piece together what the fisheries of the Penobscot watershed might look like as the natural flow of the river is restored.

"It's important for people to know how things used to be. Salmon used to get all the

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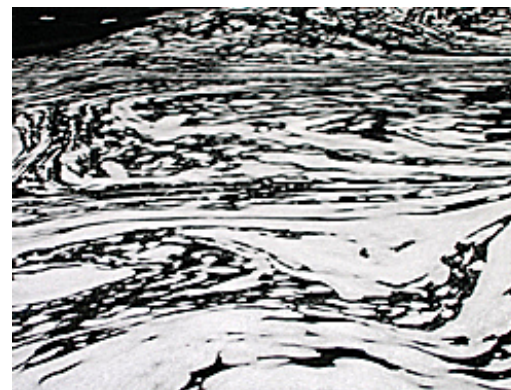
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The banks of the river below Bangor are steep and wooded, with overhanging ledges. The river gets saltier as it transitions into the Penobscot estuary and then the bay. Photo by Catherine Schmitt

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The river swirls with foam below the Great Works Dam and the Georgia Pacific mill, the first pulp mill on the Penobscot. Three decades ago, the water would be gray and the bottom would be covered with a white, sulfur-smelling slime. The Clean Water Act of 1972 was largely responsible for cleaning up the Penobscot and many other rivers. Photo by Catherine Schmitt

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## LIFESTYLE & ARTS

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way up the West Branch - no one remembers that they used to be there," says Rory Saunders of the NOAA-Fisheries office in Orono.

When the Edwards Dam was removed on the Kennebec River in 1999, fish and other wildlife came back more quickly than anyone had expected. Fisheries managers and partners in the Penobscot River Restoration Trust, many of whom have been working to restore the Penobscot since the 1960s, believe that removing dams is the last best hope for restoring striped bass, sturgeon, smelt, tomcod, salmon, shad, river herring, and eels.

Sept. 7 - Great Works Stream flows into the Penobscot in the humming shadow of the Georgia Pacific mill. My paddle dips into the foamy eddies below the dam, built more than 100 years ago by Penobscot Chemical Fibre Company, the first pulp mill on the Penobscot. Had this been 1972, the water would be gray and every solid object along the west bank would be covered with a white fuzzy mass of bacteria thriving in the sulfurous sludges dumped by the mill.

The river has changed. Gone are the islands, the sand bars and mussels, the waving weeds beneath the surface. The channel is deeper, the bottom invisible. The river drops 90 feet in the six miles between Great Works and Veazie. We are now entering a section of the river where change will be most visible if the dams are removed. (The sections are from Eddington Bend to Ayers Island, and from Great Works to the foot of the Milford dam, according to Jeff Reardon of Trout Unlimited.) As the impoundments drain, the bones of the river will tear the quickening current into whitewater, and the river's shape will vary with the seasons.

This time of year it's advisable to portage around the jagged rapids where the Stillwater branch rejoins the mainstem. Ten years ago, these rapids were almost submerged beneath the impoundment created by the proposed Basin Mills Dam. Basin Mills was a threat big enough to prompt American Rivers to name the Penobscot one of the nation's most endangered rivers in 1996.

An old timber crib dam at Basin Mills was breached in a 1936 storm, and no one saw the need to rebuild it until 1990, when Bangor Hydro submitted an application for a 1,640-foot-long, 18-foot-tall concrete structure that would drown Class II and III rapids and obliterate nursery habitat for more than 10,000 salmon smolts. The dam was approved by a pessimistic Board of Environmental Protection, which concluded, "there is no guarantee that the on-going effort to restore salmon to the Penobscot River will be successful ... restoration of a completely self-sustaining salmon run is highly unlikely with or without the Basin Mills Dam."

The Board believed that stocking, trapping and trucking salmon upstream would compensate for the loss.

The Federal Energy Regulatory Commission disagreed (fueled by legal protests of the Atlantic Salmon Federation and other groups), and in 1998 denied Bangor Hydro's application. In their view, just because it wasn't certain that salmon restoration would succeed didn't mean we could build more dams. The commission concluded that the new dam would have adversely affected the migration of almost all the anadromous fish in the whole river basin.

And with that, the dam-building days on the Penobscot were over, and the dam-removing days had begun. When Basin Mills was denied, the situation wasn't good for fish or hydroelectric power. After taking ownership of all the hydro dams on the lower river in 1999, PPL Corp. wanted to resolve the decades of outstanding licensing issues and regulatory debate about fish passage requirements. The result is an unprecedented partnership, the Penobscot River Restoration Trust, which is dedicated to restoring the river while maintaining power generation.

We cruise by the dormant smokestacks of Ayers Island. Two bald eagles sit on a branch. The water slows down near the golf course in Orono as we enter the 390-acre impoundment above the Veazie Dam, built in 1886. It is the last dam we will portage, and the first dam that migrating fish must surmount.

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Sept. 28 - The Penobscot River below the Veazie Dam was once the most heavily fished area for Atlantic salmon in the United States. Today, the only ones fishing are cormorants, kingfishers, and eagles. The fish that do make it to Veazie have to navigate a confusing layout - the fish lift is in the middle of the dam between the spillway and an old fish ladder - and many get lost.

The approach to downtown Bangor is marked by the remnants of an old dam, breached in 1976 and never rebuilt. In the 1980s, the Swift River Company proposed to rebuild the Bangor Dam, but was denied a permit because the dam would violate the Maine Rivers Act, which designated the section of the river between Sandy Point in Stockton Springs and the Veazie Dam an "outstanding river meriting special protection."

The breach is swift, but navigable at high tide. The current spirals into the legendary Bangor salmon pool. When Europeans arrived at the Penobscot River, they found staggering numbers of fish. But over several centuries, the log drives, the sawmills, and pollution took their toll. In 2005, most of the 1,635 salmon returning to U.S. rivers occurred in Maine, with the Penobscot River accounting for 81 percent of the total return (1,323 salmon). The majority of the returning fish were born in hatcheries, but a small number were of natural origin.

Just as the fish continue to return to where they were born, the river continues to pour from the great north woods, flowing around islands and falling over rocks on its way to the sea, even as it changes. The river will never return to the way it was; but we may fish the Bangor salmon pool next year and shad may get the chance to thrash their way past French Island and alewives could fill the lakes again. And perhaps someday, the Penobscot River will again be a resource for the communities that line its banks.

In 1948, a writer for the Boston Post Magazine wrote, "Perhaps no other river in New England has so bountifully given to its mother State what the Penobscot has given to Maine ... for centuries it has never ceased to perform the tasks men have designed for it." Perhaps now it is time for the Penobscot to design its own tasks and begin to find its way home.

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

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