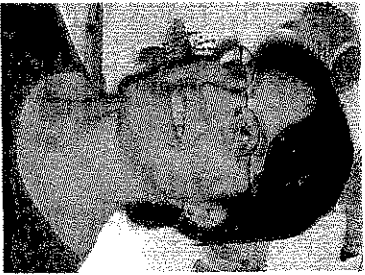


# A little fish story

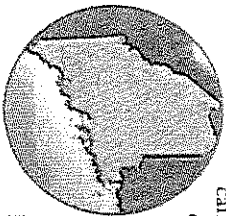
From the town landing



By Anne Hayden and Philip Conkling

Over 100 years ago in the first comprehensive study of commercial fisheries in the United States, George Brown Goode observed that the increasing number of rivers that were being dammed in Maine and elsewhere in the United States would ultimately significantly reduce the nation's coastal fisheries. His logic was simple — many populations of commercial species fed on the vast populations of river herring that migrated up the rivers annually to spawn. Without them, Goode predicted, their predators would also decline. There are many reasons New England's fish stocks are depleted, but the loss of prey species is often overlooked. But that is changing. Alewives and blueback herring, collectively known as river herring, are finally getting their day in court — and winning.

This year marks the 10th anniversary of the nationally precedent-setting removal of the Edwards Dam on the Kennebec River in Maine. For the first time since 1838,



river herring — and many other species of fish, birds and aquatic plants — have recolonized the 17 miles of habitat along this river that now flows freely from Waterville to Augusta — and on to the sea. Since the dramatic moment when the Edwards Dam was breached in 1999, 430 other dams have been removed from rivers all across the country. Dingio, Maine's motto, means "I lead."

Just this summer, the state of Maine ruled that a paper manufacturer must install fish passage facilities in a dam on the Presumpscot River in southern Maine. The ruling marks the end of a years-long struggle to restore anadromous fish (those that live in saltwater, but spawn in fresh water) populations on this river that has been dammed for more than a century to provide power to Westbrook paper mills. The success on the Presumpscot is another milestone in the campaign to restore riverine fish runs in New England and across the country.

Even though these dams have usually been removed in the name of protecting and restoring Atlantic salmon — perhaps New England's most charismatic species of fish — it may be that restoring the less glamorous little fish with the same life history will contribute more to ecosystem renewal and commercial and recreational fisheries in the long run. These little fish provide a vital source of forage for larger fish and other animals in the ocean. The leg bone is connected to the ankle bone...

Fisheries statistics make clear that, historically, runs of river herring in New England were immense. The fishery for river herring, important as far back as the Colonial era, was prosecuted inshore until offshore stocks were discovered by the distant-water fleet in the 1950s. Landings peaked at 34,000 metric tons in 1958 (more than double the cod landings that year) at a time when many dams had already been constructed; the biomass that flooded New England's rivers before damming must

have been staggering. Landings began declining precipitously in the 1960s, and now measure no more than 340 metric tons per year, a drop of 99 percent.

Building on the momentum for river restoration, an unusual collaboration of a power company, the Penobscot Indian Nation, several environmental organizations and federal and state agencies has launched an ambitious effort to remove two more major dams from the Penobscot and establish a fish passage at a third. The work will provide access for river herring, and many other species, to hundreds of miles of river and stream habitat. The project received a major boost when NOAA announced in June that it would earmark \$6 million in stimulus funds for the work.

The Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission has also taken up the cause of river herring, amending the river herring management plan to call for more stringent protection by the states in its jurisdiction and asking NOAA and the New England and Mid-Atlantic fishery management councils to reduce river herring bycatch in offshore trawl fisheries.

For decades, pollution made restoration of riverine fish habitat a moot point. Industrial discharges were an early target of the environmental movement; we've come a long way from the days when rivers caught on fire. While much remains to be done on the water quality front — including tracking less obvious sources of pollution like runoff — rivers are now clean enough to support wildlife, including fish. And environmentalists and fishermen can find common cause in restoring fish runs in New England's rivers for both pleasure and profit.

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