

SERVING THE COMMUNITIES OF MID-COAST MAINE AND BEYOND

The Times Record

www.timesrecord.com

NEWS

Alewives hold key to rebirth of fishing

By Seth Koenig, Times Record Staff

Published:

Monday, November 15, 2010 2:11 PM EST

[Print Page](#)

BATH — Longtime fisherman and marine researcher Ted Ames believes he knows how to revitalize the state's sagging groundfishing industry and generate millions of dollars for coastal economies.

The secret, he said, is to remove obstructions to alewife reproduction in Maine rivers. Ames plans to make his case during a Kennebec Estuary Land Trust presentation Wednesday night at the Maine Maritime Museum. The talk wraps up the land trust's annual fall symposium.

Through an unprecedented historical study of codfish and haddock populations off the Maine coast, Ames has tracked the decline in the once abundant — and lucrative — groundfish populations. The key to restoring them, and the multimillion-dollar industry that comes with them, he said, is to let alewives thrive.

Since alewife access to Maine's major rivers, where they historically would reproduce, has been cut off by dams, Maine's cod and haddock populations have all but disappeared. Young alewives are considered a delicacy by the groundfish, which in turn are considered fairly tasty by humans.

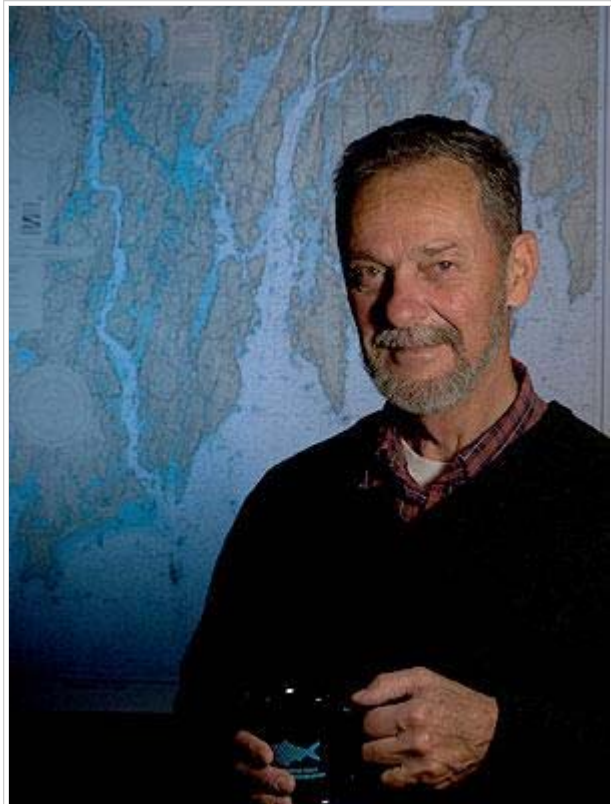
Ames added that, once the groundfish return, their populations must be managed in smaller, more localized areas.

In a recent interview with The Times Record, Ames said that with adequate upriver passage, the Androscoggin River could likely support 6 million adult alewives and the Kennebec River could support 7 million or 8 million.

"They would produce billions of eggs," he said. "And even if only a small percentage survived, there would still be billions of juveniles right here all winter. The loss of those fish is a major reason we no longer have groundfish populations here."

Ames said the scientific community currently can only pinpoint about 200 to 300 square miles of northeastern groundfish spawning area, between Ipswich Bay in Massachusetts and an offshore location called Jeffrey's Ledge southeast of Cape Elizabeth.

But Ames has been uniquely situated to develop a map of where the fish spawned in the 1920s and 1930s. A fisherman for more than 25 years, Ames plugged himself back into the communities of coastal Mainers that harvested the groundfish decades ago. He conducted exhaustive interviews and cross-checked his findings with scientific data on ideal depths and water conditions.



Ted Ames, a scholar-in-residence at the Bowdoin College Coastal Studies Center and former MacArthur Foundation Genius grant recipient, will share his views on how to revitalize Maine's groundfish industry during a talk Wednesday night at the Maine Maritime Museum in Bath.

(Troy R. Bennett / The Times Record)

Many of those interview subjects, Ames said, have now died. But thanks to Ames, their institutional memories live on in the form of research that could lead to a restoration of their beloved industry.

Ames, who co-founded the Stonington-based Penobscot East Resource Center and is currently a scholar-in-residence at the Bowdoin College Coastal Studies Center, said he can identify 700 to 800 square miles of historical groundfish spawning area along the Maine coast.

He also can link those areas to correlating historical populations of prey fish, such as alewives.

Ames said that, with alewife-friendly rivers, the Mid-coast region could see the return of an extra 10 million pounds of groundfish — which, when processed and marketed as various food items — could be worth \$40 million to \$50 million a year.

"It's fascinating," Ames said. "It's also an incredible economic opportunity for the state. If I was the incoming governor, I would make this my No. 1 priority. It could create an economic impact of tens of millions of dollars to hundreds of millions of dollars, as well as putting a great many people to work. ... I don't see where there would be any losers."

The potential alewife boom itself, he said, could also offer an economic boost. Adding to a current alewife fishery on the New Meadows River, Ames said, would drive down prices for Maine lobstermen, who rely on them as bait.

To bring back the alewives, Ames said obstructions in the river must be cleared for the small fish. He said efforts are already under way to open 1,000 miles of spawning habitat up the Penobscot River.

"There are thousands of dams in this state — some rivers have half a dozen dams on them," he said. "You don't have to get rid of all of your dams, but what you do need are at least truly functional fishways. ... If they could do comparable things (to what's being done on the Penobscot) on the Androscoggin and Kennebec to create bona fide access, you'd be a long way ahead."

Once the fish populations are restored, Ames said, they must be managed in smaller areas. The researcher said nearly 40-year-old federal fishing regulations are inadequate to protect the groundfish if they ever return. He added that fishing limits and gear must be specific to individual breeding communities, which can often be identified.

"It would be nice for these riverfront communities to have \$50,000 to a half million dollars of extra money going back into people's pockets," said Ames, who once received a Genius Award from The MacArthur Foundation for his work. "I can't think of a more effective economic engine for less (investment)."

Wednesday's talk begins at 7 p.m. at the Maine Maritime Museum, 243 Washington St., Bath. Suggested donations of \$5 per person will be accepted at the door. Seats can be reserved at www.kennebecestuary.org.

news@timesrecord.com

Copyright © 2010 - Times Record

[x] Close Window