

## **BACK FROM THE BREACHING**

*BY KEITH EDWARDS*

*Staff Writer 06/21/2009*



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**REBOUND:** Jim Thibodeau fishes for shad in the Kennebec River below the Lockwood Dam in Waterville. Shad were amongst the fish species that couldn't get that far north before the Edwards Dam was removed in Augusta.

AUGUSTA -- It was just a trickle of muddy water, poking through a dirt coffer dam on July 1, 1999.

But that trickle, the first free-flowing water there in 172 years, was the beginning of the end for the 917-foot Edwards Dam in Augusta.

The dam's removal was precedent-setting, the first hydroelectric dam ever ordered removed by the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission because the potential benefits of its removal outweighed the benefits of the electricity it produced.

Those benefits are now swimming in the river -- large striped bass, American shad, massive prehistoric-like sturgeon, alewives by the millions, and even a few rare Atlantic salmon.

They're flying above the river -- eagles, ospreys and other birds drawn to the Kennebec to feed on alewives and other fish in the free-flowing stretch of river.

And they're paddling the river's waters -- canoeists and kayakers rediscovering the solitude which can be found on the remote-feeling stretch of river despite its proximity to relatively urban areas.

"The river is much more alive, there's no question about that," said Steve Brooke, of Farmingdale, who worked as project coordinator for the Kennebec Coalition, an organization of four groups which came together to work for the removal of Edwards Dam. "To me, it was something that proved our democracy works. We did it openly, through the public process. It was a true affirmation of what it means to be an American. Where government does, in fact, react when it is approached within the process."

Mark Isaacson, then vice president of dam owner Edwards Manufacturing, said he has no regrets over Edwards Manufacturing's role in first fighting, then relenting to, efforts to remove the dam.

"I always viewed it as a tradeoff, it was then, it still is," Isaacson said. "You lost a renewable resource. We've had to replace the electricity it produced with natural gas. That has an environmental impact."

This year an estimated 2 million alewives, or river herring -- their route previously blocked by Edwards Dam -- made their way past Augusta, up the Kennebec.

"I think it has been a great success," Thomas Squiers, who oversees sea-run fish restoration and management for the state Department of Marine Resources, said of how fish have returned since the dam was removed. "We're seeing sturgeon in Waterville, American shad, striped bass, bluebacks, alewives ..."

Back in 1981, area fisherman just wanted a way for sea-run fish to be able to get past the dam on their journeys upriver to spawn.

A group of members of the Kennebec Valley Chapter of Trout Unlimited increasingly began, back in the 1980s, talking about getting a fish ladder or lift installed to get fish passed the 24-foot high Edwards Dam.

One of them -- artist and past chapter president Peter Thompson -- had a bigger idea. Remove the entire dam. Group members and fishing buddies Jim Thibodeau, of Waterville, and Bruce Bowman, of Palmyra, first thought that idea was pretty radical, even crazy. But the more they thought about it, especially given that Edwards Dam only produced a relatively small 3.5 megawatts of power, the more they thought it might be attainable.

Eventually, when Edwards Dam and other hydroelectric dams on the Kennebec came up for relicensing, they got their chance.

"If they hadn't had relicensing, this probably never would have happened," said Thibodeau, who is retired and said he's on the river, fishing, almost every day. "Then they had to consider the other uses of the river."

Jeff Reardon, of Windsor, New England Conservation Director for Trout Unlimited, noted dam licenses only come up for renewal every 30 to 50 years, making the Edwards relicensing process a nearly once in a lifetime opportunity.

Until Edwards, it was unheard of for the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission to order dams removed.

"It was such a compelling case, even though it was unheard of to say, 'Don't give these guys a license,'" Reardon said below Lockwood Dam recently, while, out in the river, about a half-dozen fisherman sought stripers, shad, and other fish. "The biological evidence was so great, it was hard to pick a place better than here. I've worked on a number of projects since. I think it has made those projects a whole lot easier to do. You can look at the evidence here. It speaks for itself."

The Kennebec Coalition -- American Rivers, the Atlantic Salmon Federation, the Natural Resources Council of Maine and the Maine chapter of Trout Unlimited -- and other dam removal advocates successfully argued the benefits of the electricity produced by the dam were outweighed by the damage it was doing to the river.

The energy commission, after numerous hearings, eventually ordered the dam removed, against the objections of dam owners Edwards Manufacturing Company and the city of Augusta, which was paid revenues from Edwards based upon how much power the dam produced.

Ultimately, in a complex deal involving compensation for the dam owners funded by a Bath Iron Works payment as part of BIW getting its permit to expand its waterfront shipyard, the state took control of the dam. On July 1, 1999, it was breached and then removed.

Isaacson is still in the energy business, as a partner in major windmill and solar projects, and the Worumbo Dam in Lisbon Falls, one of just two Low Impact Hydro Institute-certified dams in Maine.

Isaacson said while Edwards Dam could, conceivably, have been producing electricity these last 10 years, he doubts the politics of the situation ever would have allowed it to happen. He doesn't think Edwards Dam could meet the same stringent environmental standards to become Low Impact Hydro Institute certified as Worumbo is.

Dam removal proponents paddled down the Kennebec from Waterville to Augusta the day after Edwards Dam was breached.

Brooke said he was so excited he only vaguely remembers much about that day.

Bowman and Thibodeau both said they can't believe it has been 10 years since the dam was removed. Thibodeau marvels at how the river came back, and thinks it will only continue to get better.

"Think of all the years we've lost," Thibodeau said of the 172 years that stretch of river was blocked by dams. "And how fast it came back, when you give it a chance."

Keith Edwards -- 621-5647

kedwards@centralmaine.com