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## Breaching of dam, restoring salmon's passage unite many

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JESSICA RINALDI FOR THE GLOBE

Joseph Dana watched from a traditional handmade birch canoe on the Penobscot as the Veazie Dam was breached.

EDDINGTON, Maine — Two yellow bulldozers clamped down on the face of the hulking Veazie Dam on Monday, cracking open the concrete buttress that has separated Maine’s Penobscot River from the Atlantic Ocean for nearly 200 years.

The breach, the culmination of an innovative \$62 million public-private partnership, is a critical step toward revitalizing the river by restoring endangered wild Atlantic salmon and other sea-running fish to the upstream waters where they were born.

But it is more than that. The destruction of the dam, Maine’s outermost gate to the sea, is about repair and revival of relationships between tribal people, conservationists, power companies, and sportsmen for whom the river is a lifeline, too.

“We are talking of breaching a dam, but . . . instead I think we are talking about repairing a breach,” said John Bullard, Northeast regional administrator for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration Fisheries.

That is especially true for members of the Penobscot Indian Nation.

For them, the removal of the hydroelectric dam and the return of the salmon underscore a much larger dream for preserving the river.



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Penobscot Indian Nation members performed before the Veazie Dam breach. The tribe ties the river to their history.

“To the Penobscot, this river is our very soul, a place where we truly hold hands with our history and our ancestors,” Penobscot chief Kirk Francis said. “This river is simply who we are; it’s at the very core of our identity as a people.”

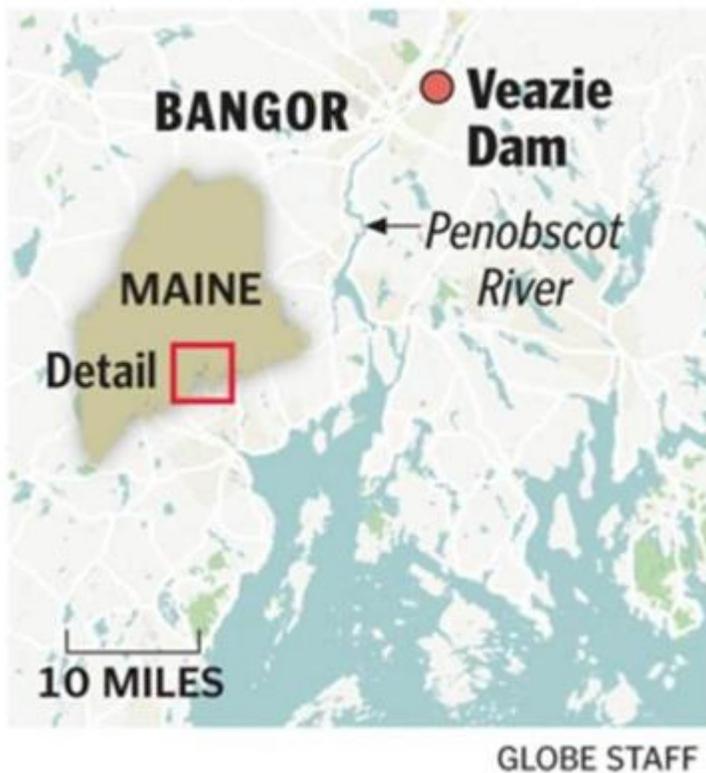
Getting to this point took the better part of two decades.

The Penobscot River Restoration Project brought commercial and conservation groups together for a fresh start in 2004 after exhausting battles over re-licensing Maine’s dams in the mid-1990s.

“After all that divisiveness, there was still no meaningful improvement in fish passage, and nobody felt like they’d come out ahead. The biggest hurdle was getting groups used to battling each other to begin trusting each other . . . and going forward for the common good,” said Laura Rose Day, the project’s executive director.

What was needed, she said, was a new approach.

In 2010, the restoration project united a spectrum of conservation groups to purchase three Maine dams — the Veazie, Great Works, and Old Town — from Pennsylvania energy company PPL Corp., for \$24 million in private and public money, beginning a new chapter for the river’s restoration.



At the same time, the electricity generating capacity of the dams that remain was increased, to assure no overall loss in power.

The removal of the Veazie Dam will allow free passage for Atlantic salmon and 11 other species of sea-running fish to 1,000 miles of inland waters ideal for spawning and rearing.

Seventy-five percent of all Atlantic wild salmon that return to the United States from Greenland enter through the Penobscot, according to Andrew Goode, vice president of the Atlantic Salmon Federation.

To finish their journey, they have to swim over the Veazie, and a number of other dams farther inland.

This arduous passage, scientists said, is one reason why the iconic wild Atlantic salmon, which once teemed in Maine's rivers, dwindled to endangered species levels in 2009.

“Imagine you're a salmon that's just swum 2,000 miles from Greenland and suddenly you run into this [dam],” Day said. “One doesn't have to be a fish biologist to understand that this is an issue.”



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Luke Sekera-Flanders, 9, of Fryeburg, Maine, was among children who collected vials of freshwater from the banks of the Penobscot River.

Buttresses like the 830-foot long and 30-foot tall Veazie have “fish ladders” — grooved paths cut into their walls to help fish clamber upward — but Day said those measures are far from perfect.

By October, those ladders will be gone along with the rest of the Veazie Dam, which will be sawed apart and removed in small concrete pieces over the summer.

Roughly 2,000 salmon passed over the Veazie Dam to spawn in the Penobscot this year, according to Tom Rumpf, acting director of the international nonprofit Nature Conservancy. In the next decade, he said, that number could multiply to an annual run of 20,000.

Even more remarkably, he said, alewife and shad counts could multiply a thousandfold over the same period, to annual runs of 2 million alewife and 1.5 million shad.

Local conservationist Steve Brooke, 67, of Farmingdale, was among the bulldozer-watchers Monday, looking over the bank toward the tiny waterfalls punching through the crevices at a corner of Veazie's crumbling face.

"The river is going to look and feel different now," he said.

"If salmon really comes back, it will take many years," he said. "But this is more important than salmon. It's about a panoply — a whole suit — of fish that co-evolved together and need each other in the face of predators."

Nearly 300 people came to Eddington, just north of Bangor, to watch a drumming performance by men of the Penobscot Indian Nation and listen to addresses by state officials before the breach.

Children collected small vials of freshwater at the bank of the river to take home as souvenirs.

"Do you think the fish are going to be happy?" Belgrade resident Brent Krizo, 39, asked his 7-year-old son, Max, at the river bank.

As he peered toward the dam, Max gave a vigorous nod, replying, "They're going to love traveling to new places."

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<http://www.bostonglobe.com/metro/maine/2013/07/22/removal-veazie-dam-maine-penobscot-river-starts-creating-easier-pathway-for-salmon/90TiLUVoBH4ozythyRsQrK/story.html>