



Ceremony – and Eagles – Mark Beginning of Veazie Dam Removal

[Gale Courey Toensing](#)
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The restoration of the Penobscot River in Maine has taken a monumental step forward with the breaching of the Veazie Dam, which will open up the river from Indian Island at Old Town to the Atlantic Ocean for the first time in more than 150 years.

Hundreds of people gathered on the banks of the Penobscot River July 22 for a day of ceremony, speeches and activities celebrating the massive \$62 million project that will ultimately allow endangered Atlantic salmon, American shad, alewife and eight other species of sea-run fish to return home to 1,000 miles of habitat on the river and its tributaries and provide access to 100 percent of historic habitat to endangered shortnose sturgeon, striped bass, tomcod and rainbow smelt.

An unprecedented private-public partnership among the Penobscot Indian Nation, seven conservation groups, hydropower companies, state and federal agencies and a huge number of individual supporters has worked on the Penobscot River Restoration Project for more than a decade. The removal of the 830-foot long, 30-foot high buttress-style Veazie Dam, which impounds almost four miles of water behind it, is expected to be completed over two years. Veazie is the first dam on the river above Penobscot Bay and the open Atlantic Ocean. The Great Works dam was removed in 2012, and fish passage

improvements will be completed upstream at Milford and Howland dams, But the removal of the Veazie Dam is the key component of the project that organizers say is among the largest river restorations efforts in the country's history and it is of crucial importance in restoring cultural and traditional wholeness to the Penobscot Nation.

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Penobscot Indian Nation Chief Kirk Francis (Courtesy Donna Loring/Seven Eagles Media Productions)

”This river is simply who we are,” said Penobscot Chief Kirk Francis. “It’s the very core of our identity as a people and it’s simply the most important in the Penobscot Nation’s life. Today is truly historic. The Veazie Dam has been the biggest obstruction. This is also historically a very significant place for the Penobscots. We had an encampment and villages here and there’s a hug archeological site here, so we’re just beside ourselves that we’ve reached this kind of care and we’re bringing this river back to its health and vitality and its natural state. We’re excited for the day when we can have salmon again in our ceremonies and get people eating them and focusing on the traditional practice that sustained us for so many years.”

At 305 miles long, the Penobscot River is the largest river in Maine and the second largest in New England (the Connecticut River is the largest at 407 miles). Penobscot creation stories and oral traditions tell of the river’s salmon and other fish being transformed into Penobscot people. The stories say Klose-kur-beh, the Penobscots’ culture hero (also known as Gluskabe or Glooscap), created the river with its headwaters at the base of sacred Mount Katahdin, Maine’s highest mountain, which in the Penobscot language means “the greatest mountain.” The river flows through the heart of Maine to Penobscot bay, draining 8,570 square miles, or about a quarter of the state. RELATED: [A Lost Native Masterpiece is Republished](#)

The river celebration day began with the Penobscot Burnurwurbskek Singers whose final offering was the AIM song. Penobscot elder Butch Phillips smudged the dignitaries on

stage while former Penobscot Chief Barry Dana sang an honor song. Then there were speeches by the various officials in attendance.

Even though the Great Works and Veazie dams are being removed, Black Bear Hydro Partners, one of the project partners, is completing projects upstream to increase energy generation. The company is also building a state-of-the-art fish elevator at Milford Dam and additional fish passageways elsewhere. “Black Bear is excited to develop new hydropower in the Penobscot watershed as part of the Penobscot Project’s new balance between energy production and fisheries,” said Scott Hill, Black Bear’s vice president of environmental and business services.



Penobscot elder Butch Phillips (Courtesy Donna Loring/Seven Eagles Media Productions)

Wendi Weber, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Northeast Region Director, hailed the project as a model for river restoration. “For the first time in 150 years, the Atlantic salmon run will naturally reach the Penobscot Indian Nation’s ancient fishing grounds on the river that bears their name. When Atlantic and shortnose sturgeon, river herring, American eels and other migratory fish reach Veazie, they will once again swim freely upstream. We are pleased to provide support for such a monumental and far-reaching endeavor,” Weber said. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which is part of the U.S.

Department of the Interior, is one of the major contributors to the restoration. Last year, the Department of the Interior designated the Penobscot River as one of American's Great Outdoors Rivers.

Other speakers included U.S. Rep. Mike Michaud (Democrat), representatives of U.S. Rep. Shelly Pingree (Democrat), Sen. Susan Collins' (Republican), and Sen. Angus King (Republican).



John Banks, director of Penobscot Department of Natural Resources (Courtesy Donna Loring/Seven Eagles Media Productions)

John Banks, the director of the Penobscot's award-winning Department of Natural Resources, said he was moved beyond words at the day's significance. "How do you describe something as important to the tribe as this event? This is a new era for the Penobscot Nation. We were able to work with so many partners that share our vision for the future of this watershed," Banks told Indian Country Today Media Network after the speeches. "I can't describe how I feel in words—it's right here," Banks said putting his palm to his heart. "You saw the eagles – not one, not two, not three, but four. They came in when they started drumming for the ceremony and they stayed for the ceremony and they left right after it ended."

Banks said he feels fortunate that part of his job is restoring native runs of fish to the Penobscot reservation on Indian Island about ten miles upstream from the Veazie Dam. "That's a responsibility that we tribal people have from the Creator. We're the first stewards of this land and that's our job and that's what we're doing."

Banks had a true fish story to tell which he said illustrates the importance of the river restoration and the connectedness of the environment. "I went fishing last night upriver

from here and I caught at least 60 small mouth bass and every one of those bass had young alewives in them,” Banks said. “They’d be shaking when they came out of the water and the alewives went flying out of their mouths! They’re literally gorging themselves with these young alewives that are a direct result of this project.” That’s because the Nation has been stocking the lakes with alewives to get a jumpstart on the river project, he said. “The alewives are called a keystone species because they’re so good for the whole ecology of the river. Two out of 1,000 alewives are needed to keep the run self sustaining. That means 998 are available for birds, eagles, osprey and other game fish like smallmouth bass – everything is linked.”



Hundreds of people gathered for the dam-breaching event. (Courtesy Donna Loring/Seven Eagles Media Productions)

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