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Dam removal movement marches from Maine to Pacific rivers

Submitted by [Rocky Barker](#) on Fri, 06/17/2011 - 10:38am.

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September, river advocates will be holding a celebration like none seen since 1999.

That was the year the Edwards Dam was removed July 1, allowing the Kennebec River in Maine to flow free for the first time since Nathaniel Hawthorne walked its banks 160 years before. This celebration in September will come to celebrate the removal of the Elwha and Glines dams in Washington's Olympic peninsula.

The Elwha dams are bigger and have been authorized for removal for far longer. Their removal in many ways marks the maturation of the river restoration movement that got its start when a bipartisan coalition sought to set the Kennebec River free.

More than 400 dams have been removed since the Swan Falls-sized Edwards Dam came down, restoring the health of 17 miles of river. The 210-foot-high Glines Dam will be the largest to come down and that contributes to the symbolic power of the act.

In October, the Condit Dam on the White Salmon River, a tributary of the Columbia will be blasted open, draining the reservoir and adding to hoopla of an event that is as much cultural as it is environmental. It will join the Marmot Dam on the Sandy River, and the Gold Hill, Savage Rapids, and Gold Ray Dams on the Rogue River that have come down to aid Pacific salmon.

But the real story of these events is how long it takes to get the political consensus necessary to carry through such a dramatic shift in policy.

The same year – 1997 -- the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission approved removal of the Edwards Dam, the Idaho Statesman called for breaching of the four federal dams on the lower Snake River in

About RockyBarker



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Intro text

Rocky Barker looks at issues that define the American West including the environment and natural resources. He is the author of "[Scorched Earth: How the Fires of Yellowstone Changed America.](#)"

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Washington to save salmon and protect Idaho water. Only two years later, Edwards crumbled but the Clinton Administration chose not to push for breaching the Snake dams.

But Maine river activists had been campaigning for more than a decade for the Edwards Dam removal. Steve Brooke, a Republican, who led the fight as director of the Kennebec Coalition, told me in 2005 to expect an even harder, longer wait on the Snake dams.

"It's different out your way -- you have to deal with tradeoffs," said Brooke , "You need to seek balance."

Former Interior Secretary Dirk Kempthorne used that approach when he dove into the polarized battle over the Klamath River in southern Oregon in 2008. He sat down with all of the sides, farmers, Indians, Pacificorp, environmental groups and others to craft a deal to remove four dams to help salmon.

But those dams are not slated to come out until 2020, a recognition of their value and the tradeoffs involved.

No matter how U.S. District Judge James Redden rules this summer on the lawsuit brought against the federal government on the Columbia and Snake dams, it is unlikely he's going to order the four dams removed. Even if he could, it would be years later before they would come down.

The fall Elwha celebrations show that the dam removal movement is going strong and will continue as nature continues to fill the dam reservoirs with silt and the hope of free flowing rivers adds to the geologic imperative.

But it also reminds us the equally optimistic movement that built the dams, and still depends on their utility for human development, is not going away either.

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