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Groups celebrate Penobscot cleanup

BY MEG HASKELL
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BANGOR — Bright blue under a sunny sky and with a fresh breeze blowing across its waters, the Penobscot River itself was the guest of honor Saturday at the fourth annual Penobscot River Revival festival at the Bangor Waterfront park.

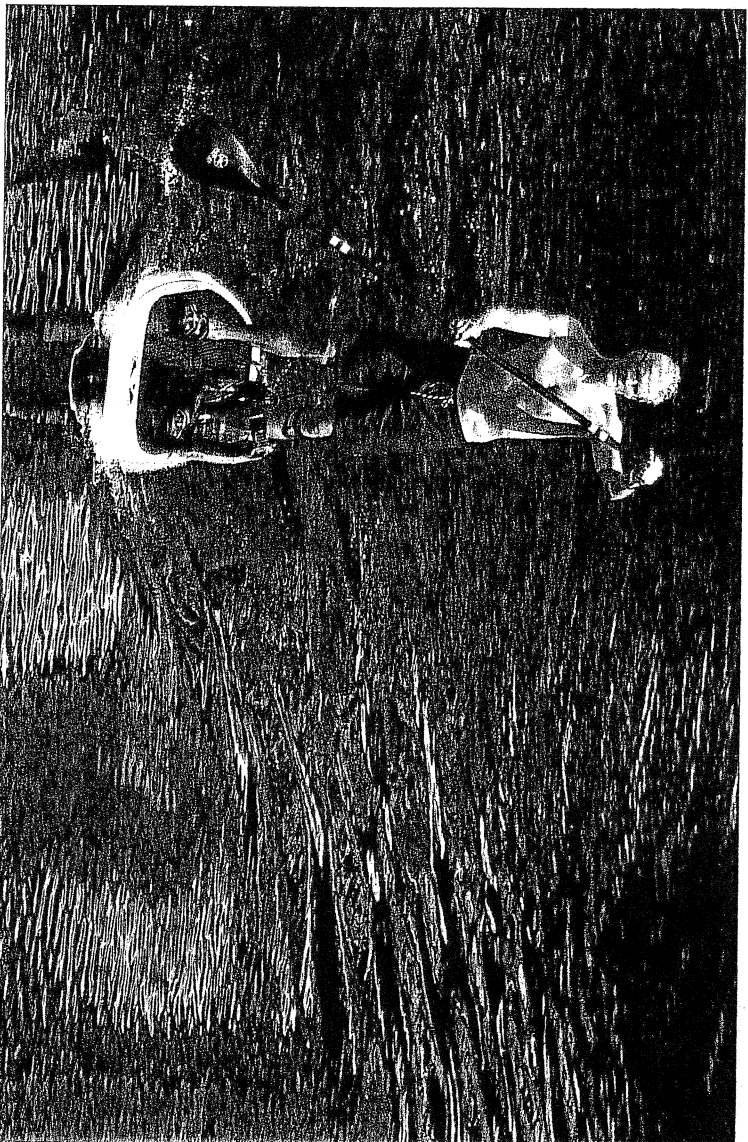
The event featured short paddling excursions, boating safety tips, river-related crafts for children, information on fish and wildlife, fly-tying demonstrations, displays of nice old canoes, live music and more. But throughout the day as a laid-back crowd ambled among the displays, the river rolled past, bright and beckoning.

It was not always like this. "When I was a kid, this river was an open sewer," said Woody Higgins, vice president of the Penobscot County Conservation Association, one of many sponsors of the festival. The organization has tried for decades — unsuccessfully — to restore Atlantic salmon and other game fish to the Penobscot.

Generations of Maine children have grown up knowing the river as a toxic soup of chemical runoff. Industrial waste and raw sewage, he said, but more recent efforts have succeeded in reversing the pro-

cess.

As the river waters got cleaner after the enactment of state



BDN PHOTO BY MICHAEL YORK

Marlin O'Connell of Bangor enjoyed the great paddling weather going up and down the Penobscot River at the Bangor Waterfront and up the Kenduskeag Stream on Saturday.

and federal environmental protection policies, wildlife gradually returned, he said. The species have followed a food-chain progression. "First, it was the insects that came back," Higgins said. "Then came the fish, and then the eagles and the ospreys."

Soon, he said, dam removal along the waterway will open See River, Page B5

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the Penobscot for sea-run fish, while also inviting river travel all the way from Howland to the mouth of the river as it flows into Penobscot Bay below Cashtine.

Festival coordinator Cheryl Daigle of the Penobscot River Restoration Trust said her group succeeded in raising \$24 million to purchase three hydroelectric dams from the Pennsylvania-based PPL power company, which owned a total of nine dams between Medway and Veazie. The purchase was completed last winter.

The project required a great deal of community education and outreach, as well as a protracted legal licensing process. Daigle said. But beginning next summer, the Great Works dam in Old Town will be dismantled, to be followed by the Veazie dam. A streamlike waterway will be created around the decommissioned dam in Howland to allow fish to migrate upstream.

Over time, species such as salmon, shad, sturgeon, striped bass and river herring, blocked for over 200 years by the impassable dams, will make their way back to their native spawning grounds, Daigle said.

The remaining six dams on the lower Penobscot are now owned by Black Bear Hydro and will continue to generate electricity, she said.

"They will actually make at least as much energy from those dams as when the project first began, and probably more," she said.

While there are economic and recreational benefits to restoring the health of the Penobscot, Daigle said the project has inherent environmental value as well.

"Restoring the river and the population of sea-run fish improves the river for all the other fish and wildlife that use it," she said. "If you have a healthy Penobscot River, the cultural and economic benefits grow naturally from that."

For Reuben "Butch" Phillips of the Penobscot Indian Nation, the river restoration project holds deep significance. Phillips was overseeing a display of traditional Penobscot crafts at the festival, including a birch canoe and finely worked ash and sweat-grass baskets.

"The Penobscot River is who we are," he said. "We take our name from our place on the river." The Penobscot has always been essential to the tribe's very existence, playing a central role in spiritual observances as well as for fishing, hunting and travel, he said.

But when he was growing up, the river had been grossly degraded by dams and pollution. "It diminished our river culture," he said.

"Thanks to the Clean Water Act and other federal and state regulations, as well as the ongoing collaboration among the Penobscot Nation, local conservation groups, economic development agencies and even the power industry, the Penobscot River is much closer now to being the life-sustaining river of his ancestors, Phillips said.

"I never dreamed that in my lifetime I would see this happen," he said. "But it is happening."