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Historic removal of dam uncorked flood of benefits

It was just two fish. But to Nate Gray, the pair of American shad that swam upstream to the Benton Falls Dam near Winslow on Wednesday – like the 1.2 million river herring that showed up this spring – was proof of nature's resiliency.

"This is the first time a shad (has made it from the ocean) to Benton since 1837," said Gray, a scientist with Maine's Department of Marine Resources who has been monitoring the fish run at the dam.

It has been 10 years since Gray and about 1,000 other people stood on the eastern shore of the Kennebec River in Augusta, listening to the ringing of church bells and watching the destruction of the 162-year-old Edwards Dam.

The breaching of the dam on July 1, 1999, was considered a turning point for river restoration efforts nationwide. It was the first time the federal government had ordered a hydroelectric dam



**JOHN RICHARDSON
DOWN TO EARTH**

DAMS

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removed against its owner's wishes.

It also was celebrated as a rebirth of the Kennebec River and its tributaries, which had been cut off from the ocean by the 24-foot-tall dam.

The decade since has been one of constant change in the Kennebec as the once-thriving waterway has recovered from what was basically "a public sewer system," Gray said. "It's nothing short of unbelievable, really."

Gray will speak about the dam's removal and the river's recovery today at The Spring Running, an annual day-long Kennebec River festival at Old Fort Western in Augusta. (For more information, go to

www.springrunning.com.)

The removal of the Edwards Dam put hydropower operators nationwide on notice that restoring sea-run fish populations, even ones that had all but disappeared, was as much a federal priority as the generation of renewable energy.

Dam removals – most with the owners' consent – have become increasingly common since then, with about 460 dams removed nationwide. Eight have been removed in Maine, including the Smelt Hill Dam in Falmouth and the Fort Halifax Dam in Winslow.

It took the removal of both the Edwards Dam and the Fort Halifax Dam to allow the shad and river herring to swim all the way up the Kennebec and Sebasticook rivers to Benton Falls this spring.

Tearing down dams remains controversial, especially given

the increasing demand for clean power. Each case is unique.

What's happened in the Kennebec is at least clear proof that rivers and fish runs can recover if given the chance, Gray said.

"Right now, we're seeing what amounts to a remarkable turnaround from what the river had been," he said. "It's something that's never, ever really been seen before."

River herring – alewives and blue back herring – were the first sea-run fish to move back into the upper Kennebec.

This spring, the first since the Fort Halifax Dam's removal, 1.2 million fish moved up through the Kennebec and Sebasticook and were passed by a fish elevator over the Benton Falls Dam. It was an exciting spring, for Gray and for the fishermen who netted thousands of pounds of alewives in Benton for the first time.

"Everywhere else on the Eastern Seaboard, these river herring populations are tanking," Gray said. "We're building the population back."

The big run of herring is good news for the Gulf of Maine, where alewives spend most of their lives and are a favorite meal for everything from tuna and cod to seals and whales.

Shad are coming back more slowly, so the pair that swam into the fish elevator this week

was "a very, very pleasant surprise," Gray said.

Gray is sure there also are striped bass swimming up the Kennebec and Sebasticook past Winslow.

While the numbers of fish swimming upstream are huge, scientists aren't entirely surprised.

Gray said he saw it coming while listening to the church bells and watching the river surge through the breached

dam in 1999.

"That very day, I went back ... and where the breach was, there were fish trying to get upstream in that huge cataract of brown mud. You could see river herring at the surface," he said. "That's how strong the drive is."

Staff Writer John Richardson can be contacted at 791-6324 or at:

jrichardson@pressherald.com