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# Hopes for a Fish Revival as a Dam Is Demolished



Craig Dilger for The New York Times

The dismantling of the Veazie Dam will help give 11 species of fish better access to 1,000 miles of spawning habitat.

By JESS BIDGOOD  
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EDDINGTON, Me. — There is a bend in the Penobscot River here, embanked by an Indian burial ground, through which millions of fish used to make a strenuous journey upstream to spawn before returning to the sea. There were elegant Atlantic salmon, prehistoric-looking sturgeon and, most numerous of all, lowly river herring, a nutrient-rich forage fish prized by ground fish, bears and birds.

But over the centuries, dams on the river and pollution from paper mills have helped with the sea runs. Atlantic salmon here are endangered now. Over time, the number of river herring running up the river dropped from as many as 20 million, according to some historical estimates, to an all-time low of 54 — that is 54 individual fish — counted at the Veazie Dam here in 2012.

So it was a relief for scores of conservationists, government officials and anglers when two pieces of construction equipment methodically began dismantling the Veazie Dam this week. It is a decade-long, \$60 million effort that, in combination with two other major river restoration projects on the Penobscot, will give 11

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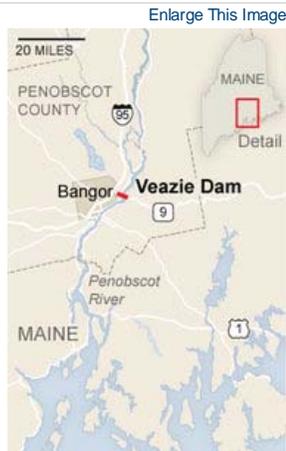
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The New York Times

species of fish, including river herring and Atlantic salmon, better access to 1,000 miles of spawning habitat for the first time in two centuries.

“I can’t think of another river restoration project in our lifetime that is opening up this much habitat to these many species,” said Josh Royte, a senior conservation planner for the Maine chapter of the Nature Conservancy, adding that, for river herring, the benefit is likely to be high several fish generations from now. “There could be billions of fish arriving where today there are very few.”

The dam removal, which was led by the [Penobscot River Restoration Trust](#) working with private, state and federal partners, is a major effort in a series of recent dam breaches and river restoration projects. Dams — even those with elevators or ladders intended to help fish over

them — can inhibit passage for fish, exacerbate dangers from predators that cluster nearby, and raise water temperature, threatening fish accustomed to cooler waters. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration is financing 37 dam and fish passage projects (it gave \$21 million to the Veazie project) from Maine to Virginia.

“It’s a very deliberate, methodical strategy that we have to go after and remove as many of these dams as is feasible,” said John Catena, the northeast regional supervisor for NOAA’s Restoration Center.

River herring, which is actually a term that encompasses two species, alewives and blueback herring, are a primary target of the effort. They are small and oily fish, rarely eaten by humans but critical as an ecological building block because they are consumed by birds and land mammals as well as larger (and more lucrative for fishermen) fish like cod and lobster.

“My job would be a lot easier if we knew how to make fish,” said John K. Bullard, the regional director for NOAA who manages the ailing commercial fisheries. “This is how we make fish.”

Since the 1999 breach of its Edwards Dam, the Kennebec River has seen river herring runs more than two million fish strong, and many river-watchers hope that will foreshadow what can happen here. “The potential here is much bigger,” said Laura Rose Day, the executive director of the Penobscot River Restoration Trust, which says the river could eventually see runs of four million to six million river herring.

The ultimate success of the population will be contingent on what happens to them during their time in the ocean, which no one here can control. And they will also need access to the lakes where they like to spawn — some of which have small dams and human neighbors who might be resistant to river herring populations, which have an erroneous reputation for being invasive.

“You’ve got the dams out, which is a huge chunk of the issue — now we need to get access into the lakes,” said Karen Wilson, an assistant research professor at the University of Southern Maine. “People are working on that, but it’s going to take more money and more support from the public.”

And if river herring do rebound here, they could help the endangered Atlantic salmon do the same, because an abundance of river herring helps shield salmon from predators. In the late 1800s, fishermen commercially harvested 100,000 salmon from these waters, but no one is allowed to fish for them here anymore. The Trust said 372 Atlantic salmon had been counted at the dam this year; its removal could eventually help that number grow to 12,000.

“It’s exciting, the fact that salmon can potentially get back,” said Mathias Deming, 15, of Winthrop, Me., who was listening to tales from group of older anglers after Monday’s

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dam breach.

Chief Kirk Francis of the Penobscot Indian Nation, said some members of his tribe had made new fish spears in the hopes that they might soon be able to fish for salmon for the first time since 1985, resurrecting tribal practices.

“I think we’ll come back to a balance, where the river is doing well,” he said. “It’s historic when a lot of people have lived and died seeing its demise.”

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