

Guest Column

Penobscot restoration benefits all

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More than a decade of rampant personal greed, leading to the worst recession since the 1930s, has transformed our nation into one where individuals now demand miraculous, rapid recovery with no personal pain; and Congress responds by turning compromise into an obscene word. Can we ever escape this nightmare and learn again to talk with civility to one another, practice sacrifice for the good of everyone and, with mutual trust, negotiate an improved path for our country?

In this first week of the new year we should remind ourselves that right here in the Bangor area we have proved that all of this is not only possible but can lead to an outcome that benefits all.

A decade ago the likelihood that the Penobscot River now would be undergoing a titanic restoration would have been inconceivable to all but a few forward-looking optimists who chose a path of dedication, inclusive negotiation and flat-out hard work to construct a plan that involved major compromises. But, in the end, it would provide benefits for a river and the surrounding communities (see the Jan. 3 editorial “Fish and Power”)

Seven conservation groups, the Penobscot Indian Nation, federal and state agencies and most critically PPL Corp., owner of the Veazie, Great Works and Howland dams, formed a coalition to hammer out a landmark plan to both open up nearly 1,000 miles of river habitat — vastly improving migration and reproductive potential for 11 sea-run fish — and at the same time maintain or increase the hydropower capacity of the river. How did this group accomplish this win-win solution?

The name of the group — [Penobscot River Restoration Trust](#) — provides a clue. Above all else, the negotiating parties needed to develop trust in one another’s motives and commitments for finding a solution. That trust eventually produced a plan that is receiving praise around the world.

Some have criticized this river restoration plan as one that sacrifices hydropower for fish migration, yet the facts clearly disprove this contention. It is true that three dams will be removed, but the money PPL will be paid for these dams provides the investment needed to update and improve hydro-power capacity at other sites.

When the project is complete, power generation will not be imperiled and may even increase. Without the \$24 million raised by the participants this would not have been possible — each side gave and each gained.

Was dam removal the only viable option? Couldn't we just have provided better fish passage around existing dams? Dams are not only an impediment to upstream migration of reproductively mature fish such as salmon, but they also are also killers of young fish as they seek to reach their ocean home.

The struggle of mature salmon to reach and lay eggs in upper reaches of the river is for naught if their offspring can't survive the obstacles of downstream passage. Many young salmon perish as they pass through turbines or tumble over dam structures. Others succumb in oxygen-deprived water that stagnates and heats up behind dams. Salmonids (salmon and trout) are exceptionally sensitive to oxygen depletion. Free-flowing rivers are essential if we ever are to see sustainable populations of Atlantic salmon.

It is worth noting that many self-sacrificing players worked behind the scenes in this monumental effort. Among these are the members of the local salmon clubs who raised funds and supported the efforts while knowing that they likely will never again fly fish for Atlantic salmon in this river. Their hope is that their children or grandchildren may be offered this opportunity. Many other unsung heroes have labored in this community effort that will, in the words of U.S. Sen. Olympia Snowe: "boost our local economy, maintain energy production and strengthen this critical watershed."

In 1912, one year after the disastrous Bangor fire, a little-known Norwegian immigrant, Karl Andersen, started a tradition that would last for more than 80 years — sending the first salmon caught from the Bangor Pool to the current president of the United States. With the restoration of the Penobscot River this cherished tradition may be possible again some day. That would be a fitting tribute to a community that favored compromise over gridlock.

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<http://www.bangordailynews.com/story/Opinion/Penobscot-success-a-win-win,163281>