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SANDRA LEONARD

Penobscot River restoration is cause for celebration

As a child growing up along the Penobscot River, I thought our river could be all things to all people. It was the source for hydro power; we were lucky, my elders said, to have such a source of power right in our own back yard. I also knew we must have one of the best salmon fisheries in the country since we always sent the first salmon to the president. Wow! I remember thinking. It has taken us generations to realize that the cost of industrial uses of the river has been high.

While early communities sprang up along the rivers all over the country for the utility of the waterways for transportation and generation of power, we now recognize the tremendous value of these rivers as much more. The region's fish and wildlife, diverse boating opportunities and scenic beauty are not only worth preserving in and of themselves, but are clearly an asset to economic development here and throughout Maine.

What's so exciting about the Penobscot River Restoration Project is that we have found a way to have both — we can revitalize economic and cultural traditions in communities along the river through restoration of the fisheries within the Penobscot River watershed, while retaining the economic benefits of hydropower generation on the river. And, the agreement to reconfigure hydropower on the river will help ensure the continued presence of PPL Corp. on the river, which is a significant economic asset to the region. By paying attention to the lessons we learned along the way, we can accomplish this and much more.

The Penobscot, Veazie and Eddington salmon clubs have added to our rich cultural heritage, and helped attract people from all over the country when the lower Penobscot River was considered the premier spot

for recreational salmon fishing. Over time the cumulative impact of so many dams on the river took its toll on salmon and all the other sea-run fish.

In addition, commercial fisheries for alewives and American shad also helped build the economy here. When industrial uses of the river predominated, we lost these legendary fisheries along with the strong ecological connection from inland waterways to Penobscot Bay and the Gulf of Maine.

Fishing for striped bass, another migratory fish that will benefit from the removal of the Veazie and Great Works dams, is becoming an increasingly important recreational fishery. More than 2,000 young adult striped bass have been caught at the Veazie

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fish trap — with removal of the dams, these fish and many more would be coming right up through Old Town to the base of the

Milford Dam. Fishermen of all types will see an increase in opportunities to fish for a diversity of species.

Paddling enthusiasts, ranging from white-water kayakers to those seeking quiet stretches of river with opportunities to view wildlife, will benefit from restoration of the free-flowing contours of the lower Penobscot River.

Business leaders and community members up and down the river are now acknowledging that the Penobscot River has many values, and that these values are not mutually exclusive. All these uses of the river contribute to the economy through money spent on equipment and supplies, lodging and the many amenities that visitors to our region seek.

The fact that we can continue to produce essentially the same amount of electricity through PPL's other hydropower dams on the river is truly remarkable, and a testament to the thoughtful considerations that went into developing the restoration project.

Sandra Leonard is a resident of Bangor.