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SUSAN YOUNG
EDITORIAL PAGE EDITOR

TOM GROENING
ASSISTANT EDITOR

RICHARD DUDMAN
SENIOR CONTRIBUTING EDITOR

P.O. Box 1329, Bangor, Maine 04402-1329

Tel. 990-8000, fax 941-9476, e-mail address letters@bangordailynews.net

PIKE IN PERSPECTIVE

A major project to restore fish and other habitat on the Penobscot River is anything but rushed. Even before the concept, which involved removing and modifying dams to allow salmon and other fish access to the upper reaches of the river, was announced more than five years ago, backers of the plan sought comment from towns and others affected by the proposal. Since then, dozens of meetings have been held to answer questions. The Penobscot River Restoration Trust even hired an outreach coordinator to work with local residents, community groups and government entities.

That's why recent complaints that the project is being "improperly rushed behind the scenes" or "moving along most expeditiously ... in order to stop any comments" are so odd.

The Millinocket and East Millinocket town councils and Millinocket Fin and Feather Club have made similar charges in recent weeks. They are rightly concerned that changes to a dam in Howland could allow pike, an invasive fish species, to move up the river and into waters in the Millinocket area.

Pike, in fact, are such a big concern that a group of state and federal fisheries officials was put together years ago to look into the problem. The Pike Threat Assessment Group is expected to release a report next month.

Here are some of the things it is likely to say. Pike are illegally put into Maine lakes by fishermen who want to

catch the big fish. They are currently found in 38 Maine water bodies, including the Androscoggin and Kennebec rivers. They were first found in Pushaw Pond, which is connected to the Penobscot River in a roundabout way, in 2003. In 2007, more than 20 pike were caught by Inland Fisheries and Wildlife biologists, as part of an eradication effort. Last year, only four were caught, suggesting that the eradication is working.

More to the concerns in Millinocket, the report may point out that the only way to keep invasive fish out of rivers and tributaries is to build really tall dams. Since this would negate efforts to rebuild populations of salmon, shad and other native fish, this is a counterproductive approach that would hurt the very fisheries the groups say they want to protect.

If anglers, like those who belong to the Fin and Feather Club, are worried about pike, they should join efforts to get the message to fishermen that illegally putting pike and other invasive species into their favorite fishing hole is not only illegal, but selfish and irresponsible. They could work with the Legislature to increase the fines for those caught doing this. They could also encourage the sponsors of Maine fishing derbies to stop using pictures of smiling anglers with large pike on their line to promote their events.

This is not as newsworthy as a protest, but in the long run, it is likely to be much more effective.