

DON FOSTER
River
restoration
opportunity

As a fisherman, businessman and president of a council representing 15 local angling and river groups around the state of Maine, I feel it is necessary to respond to Joe Bertolaccini's guest column, "Rethink Penobscot River Restoration" (BDN, Feb. 20).

His piece fails to recognize the Penobscot Project is a truly unique, once in a lifetime opportunity for the state of Maine to both restore our once grand fisheries and secure the future of energy production on the river. The hydropower company has consistently stated the Penobscot Project is a good deal for their investors, employees, and the people of Maine. As a businessman, that sounds good to me. Once the project is implemented, the company will end up with a slight increase in production and renewed long-term licenses that provides them the economic certainty essential to any business. As for the fisheries, if there was ever a project to get excited about, this is it.

In Mr. Bertolaccini's column he states that previous efforts to remove dams and water quality have failed to bring back fisheries. Nothing could be further from the truth and we need to look no farther than the Kennebec River. Since the Edwards Dam was removed in 1999, the alewife run in just the Sebasticook River has gone from zero to almost 2 million and now supports a commercial lobster bait fishery. The shad population has gone from less than 1,000 to a conservative estimate of tens of thousands of fish. The shad fishery is now being targeted by a rapidly growing number of anglers who are clearly visible each June along the banks of Gardiner, Hallowell and Waterville. Given the habitat that will be opened as the result of the Penobscot Project, the fisheries benefits, in time, will be far greater than the Kennebec and will extend into the Gulf of Maine. Respected ocean researcher Ted Ames believes the Penobscot Project has the potential to deliver billions of juvenile herring into the ocean each year and the restoration of this forage base could be critical to rebuilding groundfish stocks.

And while we agree the dams provide important electricity, no one should doubt the harmful effects they have on fisheries, water quality and the ecology of the river corridor. Unfortunately, the dams create impoundments that don't really act like a river or a pond. These impoundments tend to heat up the water, deplete oxygen levels, and are practically absent of sea-run fish which have been shown to contain lower levels of toxic chemicals than the impoundment-dwelling species. The results are diminished fish populations, poorer water quality and resident fish that are too full of toxins to eat by humans or birds.

Recent studies (National Academy of Sciences Report, 2004) have told us what fishermen have known for a long time: Dams are the culprit for the decline in Maine's sea-run fisheries. NOAA Fisheries estimates that only 5 percent of the historical spawning habitat for Atlantic salmon in Maine is accessible due to the presence of multiple dams on our rivers. The public generally knows that fishways can get some fish such as salmon and river herring over dams (striped bass, sturgeon, smelt will not use any fishway), but less known is their high mortality on juveniles and adults headed back to the ocean. The technology for downstream fish passage has never proved effective on the East Coast. The Penobscot Project should be applauded for its innovative approach in addressing this downstream mortality by removing dams while finding new ways to increase energy at remaining dams.

Much of the angling community in Maine appreciates the opportunity to fish for a variety of gamefish depending on the season. The Penobscot River is a world-class smallmouth bass fishery today and still will be when the Veazie and Great Works dams are removed. The better bass fishing on the river today is in the free flowing stretches not in the impoundments. This fishing will only get better when there are millions of juvenile herring in the system. I have little doubt the Penobscot will be both a world-class bass fishery and a world-class shad fishery as the river rebounds over time.

As Richard Jaegels, professor emeritus of the University of Maine, pointed out in his articulate summary of the Penobscot Project ("Penobscot Restoration Benefits All," Jan. 6), the project represents a compromise on the river that strikes a long-sought balance between important economic use and the landmark restoration of Maine's great sea-run fisheries.

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