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The Fish Run Through It

By [Gale Courey Toensing](#) January 17, 2011[RSS](#)

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It has been more than a quarter-century since the Penobscot Indian Nation has taken a salmon from the sacred Penobscot River for ceremonial purposes. But the day is fast approaching when they can resume the traditional practice of their ancestors.

On Dec. 20, the nation and its Penobscot River Restoration Trust coalition partners announced they had reached an important milestone in their seven-year effort to restore the river with the \$24 million purchase of three hydroelectric dams from the PPL Corporation, an Allentown, Pa.-based power generating company. The two dams closest to the Atlantic Ocean, Veazie and Great Works, will be broken down and an engineered stream will be constructed around Howland Dam, 35 miles upstream from Old Town, Maine (the historic home of the nation), to create a fish bypass. This project will open up more than 1,000 miles of fish habitat on Maine's largest river and its tributaries to 11 species of sea-run fish, including sturgeon, river herring, American shad and the endangered Atlantic salmon that is central to Penobscot culture and tradition.

The restoration project will restore a free-flowing river from the Atlantic to beyond Old Town for the first time in more than 100 years, returning sea-run salmon and other species to the shore of the Penobscots' Indian Island homeland. The river revitalization will also restore historic tribal traditions and present new opportunities for economic growth, Chief Kirk Francis said. "The Penobscot nation has not formally as a tribe harvested a salmon for ceremony in over 25 years," Francis said. "It's our choice not to do that because we know their numbers are so low and we want those opportunities in the future, so we've not been practicing our cultural traditions for almost three decades. So what the river restoration means for us as a people in terms of getting back to our traditions, our traditional diet and those types of things is going to be huge, so huge, it's hard to quantify."

Penobscot Indians have lived on this river for more than 10,000 years, so its waters and its fish are

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inextricably bound to their identity and existence. The tribe's creation stories and oral traditions tell of the river's salmon and other fish being transformed into Penobscot people. The stories say Klosekur-beh, the Penobscots' culture hero (also known as Gluskabe or Glooscap), created the river with its headwaters at the base of sacred Mount Katahdin, Maine's highest mountain, which in the Penobscot language means "the greatest mountain." The river project has spurred a lot of conversations and research into reestablishing the traditional ceremonies, generating a sense that the river restoration will be a spiritual restorative for the nation as well. "As the river gets healthier and people get to exercise their traditions, stand in those same spots as our ancestors and practice those things, I think it'll be an enormous benefit to our people," Francis said.

The Penobscots are not the only ones who are overjoyed at the prospect of a restored river and its 8,570-square-mile watershed. It took a mighty coalition to make it happen. The river project is not only unprecedented in scope, but also in the collaboration between an array of stakeholders, including the nation, PPL Corporation, Black Bear Hydro Partners, LLC (which purchased most of PPL's holdings in Maine in 2009), state and federal agencies, and conservation groups including American Rivers, Atlantic Salmon Federation, Maine Audubon, Natural Resources Council of Maine, the Nature Conservancy and Trout Unlimited.

Senator Olympia Snowe (R-Maine), who has supported the project from its beginning, said, "The Penobscot River is a tremendous resource for our economy providing clean energy, fishing and other recreational activities for our region. The restoration project enhances the management of the river by boosting our local economy, maintaining energy production, and strengthening this critical watershed."

The Penobscot River Restoration Trust was formed in 2004 to implement the project. Under an agreement reached that year, PPL agreed to sell the three dams to the trust for roughly \$25 million. PPL, in return, was allowed to increase power generation at six other dams along the river, offsetting the losses incurred when the Veazie, Howland and Great Works dams are decommissioned. "This landmark partnership has proven that business, government and interested citizens can reach mutually agreeable solutions that benefit the community, the economy and the environment," said Dennis J. Murphy, vice president and chief operating officer of PPL's Eastern Fossil and Hydro Generation unit.

The \$24 million used to purchase the three dams was raised through private donations and a \$10 million grant from the federal government directed through the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA). Another \$30 million in private and public funding will be raised to complete the project.

John Banks, director of the Penobscot Nation Department of Natural Resources, predicts that it won't take long for the salmon and other anadromous species to come home. "We expect some of the native migratory fish populations to expand soon after the dams are removed," he said. "There're remnant populations of some species, like salmon and alewives. Others may take several years of stocking after the dams come out, to jump-start those populations, like American shad." All the necessary approvals for the project were secured in October, including permits from the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission, Maine Department of Environmental Protection and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. Work to remove the Great Works Dam combined with scientific monitoring before its removal will produce nearly \$5 million in regional jobs in engineering, hydrology, construction, science, and local contracting services. Similar economic boomlets are expected for the Veazie Dam removal and the Howland bypass construction. The trust hopes to begin the deconstruction of the Veazie Dam in 2012.

Francis said he expects economic benefits for the Penobscot nation to extend beyond the project's completion. "There is economic opportunity when you talk about the people who know this river better than anyone else. I think people are excited to spend time on the river with eco-tourism opportunities and guiding opportunities and that kind of thing, so I think it's going to be a real economic benefit to the Penobscot nation and the communities in the Penobscot River valley." The ground-breaking project has been hailed as a model of collaboration in Europe, Australia, South America and all over the U.S. "Everybody involved worked together," Francis said. "I think this proves that when people put their minds to common goals, they can be achieved."

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