

Two Lives, One River

How two local students came to really know the Penobscot

BY MISTY ANN EDGECOMB

When biologists thrust a writhing silver fish into your water-filled rubber boot, it's time to start running.

This is an Atlantic salmon, a ghost of the river's past, an endangered survivor that fought its way home across hundreds of miles of open ocean; and it's your job to ensure its safe transport to a fish hatchery for breeding.

The life of the river is literally in your hands.

"They're feisty fish. It's flapping all around, and you're trying not to drop it," Margo Relford says, laughing as she recalls one of the high points of her summer as a Nature Conservancy diversity intern on the Penobscot River.

Relford and her fellow intern Ana Rapp spent three months working on all aspects of river conservation—from the fish trap at Veazie, where they tagged salmon, to the far reaches of the basin, where they documented impediments to fish passage. It was a fantastic summer job for University of Maine students preparing for a future in conservation, but the experience touched something deeper in these women, who both grew up on the river's banks.

Rapp, whose mother is a member of the Penobscot Indian Nation, recalls summer days spent paddling the river in her grandfather's canoe, listening to stories of how he caught fish and picked fiddleheads as a boy—a life that his descendants can barely imagine.

"He knew everything about the river and how it worked," says Rapp.

But the river flows between the generations, and natural wisdom is being rediscovered as Rapp visits remote tribal trust lands for the first time and sees her grandfather's lessons come to life.

"I was just raised to appreciate nature and everything in it—to realize that there's a balance between taking care of ourselves and the places we live," she says.

Both Rapp and Relford were familiar with the Penobscot River Restoration Project, a cooperative effort to restore native fish to the river, but seeing the details made the importance of conservation come alive in a new way. Holding a prehistoric shortnose sturgeon or boating alongside a mill's discharge pipe—both women say they'll carry these experiences throughout their lives.

"It was shocking to see. You've got the picturesque scenes all around you, but you can actually see the pollution bubbling up," says Relford, who came to the Conservancy after considering a career making paper. A previous summer internship at a riverside mill showed her that she wasn't meant to spend her life at a desk, talking about nature as an abstraction and looking at the river through glass.

As a little girl, Relford would go out and lose herself in the woods behind her Brewer home, lying on the ground with the sounds and smells of the forest filling her mind. "When you're out in nature,

ON THE WEB »

Get to know diversity interns Ana Rapp and Tendai Mutunhire through video interviews at nature.org/mainenews.

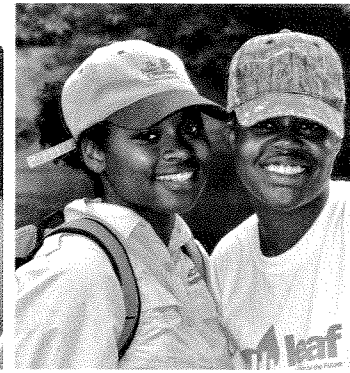
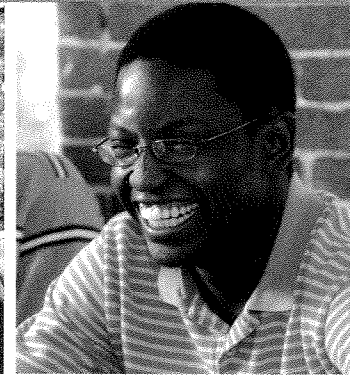
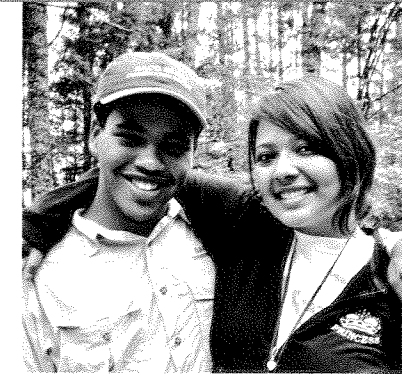
everything has its own rhythm and everything operates by its own rules," she says. "It helps you understand your place in the world."

Rapp's and Relford's internships were both made possible through The Nature Conservancy in Maine's new diversity program.

"Ana's and Margo's experiences on the river are exactly what this new program is about," says Stefan Jackson, diversity program director. "It's exciting to see these connections being made—between students and the natural world and between the students themselves. The summer was a string of these new ideas and new friendships."

Jackson explains that while the program is gratifying to manage from a human perspective, it is also a strategic move for conservation. "If the Conservancy is going to meet the challenges of the next century, we need to build a bigger tent and cultivate our next generation of leaders."

"So the Conservancy is getting just as much out of this as the students are," he says. "As we work to protect biodiversity within our natural communities, we are benefitting from the strength of diversity in our human community."



Margo Relford (far left) and Ana Rapp (second from left) were both part of the Conservancy's new diversity program in Maine. © David Bates/TNC

Introducing The Nature Conservancy in Maine's new diversity program, an initiative to educate the next generation of environmental leaders. This summer, six New York City high school students with two mentors worked in Maine through Toyota's LEAF environmental education program, while seven college students interned through partnerships with Bowdoin and Colby colleges, Davis United World College Scholars and Wabanaki Center at UMaine. Photos © David Bates



JANUARY » As administrator of the Maine Natural Resources Conservation Program, the Conservancy distributes \$1.8 million in grants to support 11 public and nonprofit groups' freshwater restoration and conservation projects.

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MARCH » Maine launches a Conservancy-coordinated initiative to integrate climate-change impacts into wildlife management plans for all ecosystem types.

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MAY » Conservancy celebrates the first migration season in a century on Blackman Stream (a Penobscot River tributary) after supporting partners in completing a new fishway in fall 2009.

A Month-by-Month Calendar of Freshwater Conservation

FEBRUARY » The Conservancy acquires two parcels in the Kennebec Estuary, preserving more than 100 acres and some 2,800 feet of combined shoreline habitat on the Androscoggin and Cathance Rivers.

APRIL » With partners, the Conservancy places an easement on 83 acres of active farmland along Merrymeeting Bay in Bowdoinham, conserving prime shoreline habitat and some of Maine's best farming soil.

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JUNE » Federal Energy Regulatory Commission approves the Penobscot River Restoration Trust's plans to remove and bypass dams on the Penobscot River.

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AUGUST » Conservancy science staff inventory brook trout streams and lake fish habitat in Debsconeags Lake Wilderness Area.

OCTOBER » Robust inventory of fish-passage barriers in Penobscot River watershed's streams collected. This volunteer-assisted effort will inform ongoing restoration in the area.

JULY » Removal of West Winterport Dam begins on Marsh Stream (another Penobscot River tributary), with support from the Conservancy.

SEPTEMBER » Successful field season completed for in-depth research of ecosystem health in the Penobscot River watershed. Data will be used to measure benefits of dam removal and promote river restoration widely.