

# A Tribal Perspective

## *Atlantic Salmon and the Penobscot Indian Nation*

The Penobscot River in Maine has been home to Atlantic salmon and the Penobscot Indian Nation since time immemorial. With its forested upland, diverse rivers and many lakes, the Penobscot River Basin has sustained the people of the Penobscot Nation for thousands of years. The rivers flowed freely, abundant with salmon and other diadromous fish species. The history, culture and economics of the Penobscot Nation are intimately connected with the river and the sea-run fish that return every spring. Atlantic salmon were at one time a herald of spring, a very welcome food source and proof of the health of the river and its people.



Ten miles upriver from the head of tide lies Indian Island, the springtime home of the Penobscot Nation. It is a tribally significant place where weddings,

celebrations and important meetings between tribal clans have taken place over the centuries. All clans would gather on the island every spring and take advantage of the seemingly endless supply of fresh fish in the falls below Indian Island. These falls had many islands and side channels that provided excellent opportunities for catching Atlantic salmon and other sea-run fish that swam up the Penobscot River each spring.

In the early 1800s, dam construction on the Penobscot isolated sea-run fish from their upriver spawning grounds. Timber dams were built along the river at falls



such as Veazie, Great Works and the falls below Indian Island, now known as Old Town Falls. The islands below Indian Island at Old Town Falls were permanently flooded by the construction of the concrete Milford Dam in 1906. Fishing grounds disappeared along with the fish, and the Penobscot Nation's people and the salmon were barred from their traditional use of the river.

Today, there is hope for the future health of the Penobscot River and its sea-run fish. Through the Penobscot River Restoration Project, the two main-stem dams downstream of Indian Island, the Veazie Dam and the Great Works Dam, have been removed from the river. The Milford Dam is now the first dam on the river and has a new state-of-the-art fish lift that began operating in 2014. Farther up river, a stream-like bypass channel was built around the Howland Dam in 2016. The nature-like fishway bypasses the Howland dam and allows aquatic and terrestrial wildlife to move both up and down the river, connecting the Piscataquis River to the Penobscot River and ultimately the Gulf of Maine.

These projects dramatically increased access for sea-run fishes. More than 1,000 miles of river and stream habitat now have improved or complete access for the sea-rush fish of the Penobscot River. Since the installation of the fish lift at the Milford Dam, returns of Atlantic salmon have grown from a historic low of 261 adult salmon in 2014 to nearly 1,200 in 2019.

Joe Dana of the Penobscot Indian Nation paddles a birch bark canoe by the area where the Veazie Dam was being demolished.

During that time, river herring (blueback herring and alewife) numbers have climbed from 187,438 to more than 2 million fish annually. Another success is the return of American shad to the Penobscot River. In 2014, 817 American shad were captured, in 2016, 8,223.

The Penobscot River Restoration Project is a collaborative partnership, including the Service, the Penobscot Indian Nation, Maine, and other natural resource conservation groups. Projects such as this one exemplify how a healthy and functioning river benefits all people. Today, Atlantic salmon and their sea-run fish brethren have significantly better and safer access to the waters up the Penobscot River. In time, the healing Penobscot River will provide sustenance for the Penobscot people who have always called this land home. Once again, the Penobscot Nation can look to the Atlantic salmon as a herald of spring.

*Originally written by Dan McCaw, a fisheries biologist with the Penobscot Indian Nation. He talks about the historical connection between native people and the species that helped sustain them for thousands of years, Atlantic salmon. Revisited by McCaw and the Service's Mike Crowley.*