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ATLANTIC SALMON MAY AGAIN RUN IN NEW ENGLAND STREAMS

A cooperative program by the State of Maine and the U.S. Department of the Interior has proved that runs of Atlantic salmon--one of the world's great game fish--can be restored to New England streams after more than 100 years absence.

A joint statement by the Interior Department's Bureau of Sport Fisheries and Wildlife and the Atlantic Sea Run Salmon Commission today disclosed that continuing research and development have enabled Atlantic salmon to migrate from headwaters of Maine's Penobscot River to the sea and then later return for spawning.

Alfred Meister, chief biologist of the Commission, has stressed that salmon must have fast, clean water, gravelly beds for spawning, and unobstructed passage to and from the sea during migration. Dams with inadequate fish passage facilities, plus wastes from industries and municipalities, changed the physical and chemical qualities of the Penobscot and other New England streams. Thus as early as 1870, salmon could no longer ascend to ancestral spawning headwaters of many streams in the area.

The first step in the Penobscot cooperative program was the building of fishways to bypass existing dams. The passages were so located that salmon would easily find and use them in migrations up and down the river.

The second step involved stocking young hatchery produced salmon in the headwaters. This was coordinated with fishway construction so that fish could leave for the sea and then return. Last spring, with the river open to fish migration, more than 135 salmon were trapped on their way up the river, and tagging showed that the fish were those that had been planted two years earlier from hatchery stock.

Penobscot River salmon still had to contend with polluted water in the lower river and estuary. But they made the trip to the sea and back because they moved at a time when stream flow was high, diluting some of the harmful effects of the waste. This doesn't mean that we can have both pollution and regular runs of Atlantic salmon, the experts hasten to add. We can't, but it is a positive indicator that with improved water quality and better stream conditions, greater numbers of salmon will succeed in migrating to and from rivers in the New England area.

The Bureau of Sport Fisheries and Wildlife's Craig Brook National Fish Hatchery and several hatcheries operated by Maine's Department of Inland Fisheries and Game overcame the difficult task of hatching eggs, growing young to a migratory age, and then releasing them in the Penobscot at the proper time. The hatchery life cycle spanned one to two years, after which the fish were stocked in the river. Upon release, the young fish quickly acquired a lasting impression or "imprint" which brought them back to the same stream after two years at sea.

The Penobscot project is one of those being carried out cooperatively between the Bureau of Sport Fisheries and Wildlife and the States under provisions of the 1956 Anadromous Fish Conservation Act. Fifty percent of the funding comes from Federal outlays while the remainder is supplied by the States.

Interior Secretary Walter J. Hickel said: "This project may eventually prove as significant as the coho salmon transplants in the Great Lakes. And the project again shows that Federal and State agencies can pool financial and technical resources to correct environmentally destructive practices of long standing. The Atlantic Sea Run Salmon Commission is to be congratulated for its fine work and cooperation in making this achievement possible."

Ronald W. Green, the Commission's chairman, said: "The Penobscot River is a model of many New England streams--one that reflects destruction of an excellent fishery by human misuse and abuse. But it also offered the opportunity for joint State-Federal remedial measures to restore the resource. We have proved it is possible; now we must build on our success to achieve a thriving fishery for this superb species."

Atlantic salmon differ from their Pacific cousins in not dying after spawning. The Atlantic types return to the sea and, if they are not harvested or suffer death from other causes, will return several times to spawn in the original ancestral streams. Most growth of the Atlantic salmon at sea takes place at feeding grounds off Greenland.

This year's migrants up the Penobscot were caught and taken to hatcheries for artificial spawning; then they were released in the river so they could return to the sea. These fish that were originally planted from hatchery stock are now contributing to stocking of future generations. Eventually, planting of stock may be accomplished for the most part by the fish themselves through spawning at headwaters.

Assistant Secretary Leslie L. Glasgow, who heads Interior's programs for parks, fish, and wildlife, summed up possibilities thus:

"The success of the Penobscot River restoration project may prove to be a turning point in the fortunes of the Atlantic salmon. But many obstructions on streams will have to be removed or bypassed, a strong pollution abatement and control program is essential, and more salmon production facilities are required."

Dr. Glasgow also pointed out that the "results of the best planned inland program can be nullified by indiscriminate fishing on the high seas such as that being carried out off West Greenland. The solution to this problem must be found in controls developed through international negotiations and adhered to by all nations. The United States is approaching this aspect of the problem by its membership participation in the International Commission for the Northwest Atlantic Fisheries.

"With a concentrated, unified effort on the international as well as national fronts by Federal, State, and local governments, we may again see the great Atlantic salmon swimming in rivers from Maine to Connecticut," Dr. Glasgow said.

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