

Penobscot River Restoration Project

History & Culture of the River Workshop

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Penobscot Nation

Dr. Richard Judd, University of Maine, Professor of History, Speakers Notes

Workshop Discussion

Would like to make three points then a brief summary of the fate of the fishes in the Penobscot

1. Early settlers unanimously expressed amazement about abundance of fish in river - couldn't understand -- almost "unnatural" god would send fish upriver in these numbers; but quickly perceived salmon, shad, alewife runs as providential: fish migrate in early spring; distributed evenly through entire river basin exactly when farmhouse larder running on empty

2. Considered fish crucial to extending frontier upriver: depend heavily on forage -- part of complicated strategy of survival between harvests: fish almost as central to diet as it was to Penobscots

3. Considered a "common property" in the very localistic, almost communal outlook of pioneer farmers in valley; fish were part of the responsibilities of the towns to manage runs and catches and do so equitably; these common rights were strained as interregional markets for fish opened up, but where towns controlled watershed (Newcastle-Nobleboro on the Damariscotta) these community management systems were amazingly persistent

SO: these three things - providential, essential to survival, common management traditions - made fish and fishing part of Penobscot Valley yeoman farmer identity; fished between farming duties; socialized while fishing, saw this as part of their seasonal round -- imparted a very different value to the fish from those who began fishing commercially at the turn of the century: fish were not for personal gain; commercial fishers were "money makers"; a different breed: point is again Penobscot Valley farmers invested enormous VALUE (subsistence and symbolic) in these fish

SO: when FIRST CRISIS developed -- commercial fishing -- was an intense battle over who owned the fish and how they would be taken:

Weirs: regulated by tide, prescribed closed days, gates in weirs, their length across river

SECOND CRISIS was dams:

1825 Bangor Dam: state laws required fishway, but poor placement, so upriver dam owners refused comply; 1830s Bangor Lumber Boom in full swing; staggering HP needs

THE BATTLE: Dam owners make several arguments (would seem familiar today)

- Industrial economy more dynamic than static agrarian way of life
- argued for a more dynamic and instrumental set of laws and rights to govern river
- higher productive, intensive use of the river; more value added to resource
- fishing -- forage -- passive occupation; back-country indolence; waste time

BUT SOME GOOD ARGUMENTS TO FAVOR FISH OVER DAMS:

- a "prior" use; and seemed more "natural" than "artificial" use of the river
- fishing "public" use of the river; tied more closely to village life than export mills
- Mainers draw nationwide anti-monopoly sentiment Jackson era; fish favor poor
- Mainers loath to abandon pioneer heritage: fish essential to moving frontier north

SO: 1828 formed Town & County Fish Wardens; would meet once year to check dams and weirs: keep runs steady

BUT: huge problem with poachers
 poor compliance with fishway laws
 exempted streams were fish scarce and mills benefit community more finally, big mills seize this argument PERHAPS could have challenged, but lack of unity among fishermen: Bay Shore Fisheries, downriver fisheries refuse to comply with weir close times; the fish they let pass would only be caught when the migrated upstream anyway

SO: Some laws, but aggregation of special laws, exemptions, confusing, contradictory; fish get little help from the legislature

BUT: Penobscot Lumber dams had sluiceways, passable at high tide, RUN stays active until 1860s-1870s - also intensive re-stocking program begun with nation's first fish hatchery Craig Brook Orland 1871

THIRD CRISIS: 1882-1900: 16 pulp and paper mills

Fish presented with multiple threats, impassable fishways, poachers, and now industrial pollution - left lines of dead fish below outfalls, sawdust covers spawning beds, rotting organic matter deprived water of dissolved oxygen

SO: enormous discouragement to fish wardens and to fish: benefits of pulp and paper industry too widespread to challenge - political power

CHANGED STRATEGIES: Abandoned river fisheries - balance of nature undone - appeal to new constituency: elite tourists who fished for recreation and social status and fished from inland lakes and upland streams: much easier to stock, and to control both pollution and overfishing;

pretty much end of river fisheries, although run continued into the 1950s.

A depressing story in many ways, but the important point is what the fish meant to the people of the valley - Penobscot and white - and how they saw the fish - and the river - as part of their identity; if we can re-invest the fish with this value, could be optimistic about the future of the river

