

A 'small leap' for salmon; more needs to be done

By Ed Friedman

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My answer to the headline "A Giant Leap for Atlantic Salmon?" for the editorial in the Sept. 2 issue of The Times Record is: Certainly not! Any salmon worth its salt has probably been "stepping" over this tiny 3-to-4-foot ledge on the Little River for years. It would not be surprising if, indeed, the Little River has provided the best and perhaps only spawning habitat available on the lower Androscoggin River, much as Bond Brook and Togus Stream did on the Kennebec River before the removal of Edwards Dam.

Make no mistake, I believe this is indeed a wonderful "Little River" worth making more accessible for salmon and, for the first time in years, accessible to blueback herring and sea lamprey. However, while Friends of Merrymeeting Bay wrote a letter of support for the removal, we did so with several important caveats worth repeating:

1.) The removal of dams is a needlessly burdensome process. This dam is a good example. To successfully move all species of fish, a few hours and some explosives would work just fine (I say this with experience as a blaster.) One could also use an excavator with jack hammer on the boom. There is no need to remove all of a dam like this, just open it up. Certainly to just provide decent passage, this could be done for a couple of thousand dollars.

To clear everything out, perhaps a couple of days with an excavator would do the trick. We have a very serious problem with the plight of diadromous fish, particularly in relation to the Gulf of Maine fishery and this is an emergency situation.

Unfortunately it appears nearly as cumbersome and costly to remove a dam as it is to build one. This makes no sense. We should be providing incentives to create the positive changes we desire and need, to survive.

We're not. In fact, it is very much the opposite.

In sharp contrast, Maine now offers "expedited permitting" for those that want to carve up mountain tops for wind farms or experiment with new forms of hydro generation.

2.) We generally attack fish passage problems one dam at a time. (The Penobscot Restoration Project is an exception, but has its own problems). We don't have time for this. The inability of migratory forage or prey fish to reach their spawning grounds has very likely played a major role in the decline of our Gulf of Maine fishery.

Healthy rivers mean a healthy Gulf. There are between 650 and 950 dams in Maine including about 100 hydro dams. Unless we are in this to make work, keep environmental groups in business and lose species, we'd better start working on a "global" scale.

And there is a fundamental problem with large buy-outs of hydro dam owners. These are private corporations, usually quite large and making lots of money using a public resource at no cost to them. Capital costs of our aged dams have long since been paid for. If hydro and non-hydro dam owners are to use the public resource, they must be held to the highest possible environmental standards for fish passage and other related issues like impoundment size and temperature or discharges.

There is no reasonable excuse to allow otherwise.

3.) Safe downstream passage. As long as turbines are not blocked by screens angled off to sluices or gates, outmigrating fish will die. Turbine mortality at hydro dams has been well documented in the Atlantic Salmon Status Review, listing decision and many other sources.

There are two mainstem dams below the Little River. Neither dam has safe downstream passage. (Brunswick's small downstream tube is smack in the middle of four turbines-fish get to play Russian roulette). Unless this is remedied, a death sentence remains for diadromous species attempting to move downstream.

The situation here is not quite so bad as on the Kennebec, where adult salmon are trapped at Lockwood Dam and trucked to the Sandy River for spawning and rearing. While the Sandy offers wonderful habitat, this leaves the salmon four large dams with unscreened turbines they must pass to get back to sea. Not good odds for the only known adults in the Kennebec.

Nor is it good sense for restoration efforts that cost hundreds of millions of dollars or for an assortment of species on their way to extinction.

Ed Friedman is chairman of Friends of Merrymeeting Bay, which co-filed in 2005 with Douglas and Tim Watts and the Maine Toxics Action Coalition, a citizens Endangered Species Petition to expand Endangered Species Act protection to Kennebec River Atlantic salmon.

letters@timesrecord.com