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EDITORIAL

10 Years, 430 Dams

Ten years have gone by since a modest but important moment in American environmental history: the dismantling of the 917-foot-wide Edwards Dam on Maine's Kennebec River.

The Edwards Dam was the first privately owned hydroelectric dam torn down for environmental reasons (and against the owner's wishes) by the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission. Bruce Babbitt, the interior secretary at the time, showed up at the demolition ceremony to promote what had become a personal crusade against obsolete dams. The publicity generated a national discussion about dams and the potential environmental benefits — to water quality and fish species — of removing them.

It certainly helped the Kennebec and its fish, and dams have been falling ever since. According to American Rivers, an advocacy group and a major player in the Edwards Dam campaign, about 430 outdated dams (some of them small hydropower dams like Edwards) have been removed with both public and private funding. In one case, the removal of a small, 50-foot dam on Oregon's Sandy River was paid for entirely by the electric utility that owned it in order to improve salmon runs.

More lies ahead. Three dams that have severely damaged salmon runs in Washington State are scheduled to come down in 2011. A tentative agreement has been reached among farmers, native tribes and a power company to remove dams on California's Klamath River, the site of a huge fish kill several years ago attributed mainly to low water flows caused by dams.

Maine, where this all began, will be the site of a spectacular restoration project. Under an agreement involving the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, a coalition called the Penobscot River Restoration Trust and PPL, a power company, two dams will be removed and a fish ladder built at a third to open up 1,000 miles of the Penobscot River and its tributaries so that fish can return to their traditional spawning grounds.

A half-dozen species should benefit, including endangered Atlantic salmon. The federal government has now imposed "critical habitat" protections in nine Maine rivers where the salmon return to spawn.

NOAA's heightened interest in Atlantic salmon has raised hopes that it may now take aggressive — if politically risky — steps to protect salmon on the West Coast by ordering the removal of four big dams on the Lower Snake River. This page has recommended such a move, which two previous administrations have ducked. It seems now within the realm of possibility.

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