Fish passage, flood control and a Maine town united

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On May 23, communities around the world will celebrate World Fish Migration Day, as sea-run fish begin their remarkable journeys from the ocean into rivers, lakes and streams to spawn. The theme of this year's celebration is "We Are River People," a phrase that resonates deeply here in Maine.

Maine is home to over 5,000 rivers and streams, and communities have long depended on the health of these ecosystems. But over the course of the 19th and 20th centuries, the push to harness rivers for industrial power fundamentally reshaped them. The construction of dams and road crossings to support sawmills, grain mills and textile factories blocked the natural migration of sea-run fish, which include river herring, brook trout, American eels, striped bass, sturgeon, American shad and endangered Atlantic salmon.

Restoring river systems is complicated work. It requires not only engineering and ecological expertise, but community trust. On the Narraguagus River in Cherryfield, that trust has been carefully built over more than a decade, and we're now beginning to see the results.

This summer, the Downeast Salmon Federation is leading the Cherryfield Fish Passage Improvement Project in partnership with the town of Cherryfield, Maine Coast Heritage Trust, The Nature Conservancy and Atlantic Salmon Federation, to replace the river's last remaining mainstem dam with a nature-like fishway. By November, sea-run fish will encounter fewer barriers to their migrations on the Narraguagus River than at any point in the past two centuries.

The Cherryfield Ice Dam, owned by the town of Cherryfield, was built in 1961 to address the problem of ice floating downriver and flooding downtown Cherryfield. But the 7-foot structure also blocks or delays fish migrations.

The new fishway in Cherryfield has been carefully designed to address both challenges. Engineered to mimic a free-flowing river, part of the fishway will consist of a series of step pools made out of boulders. Fish will scale the same elevation they always have, but more gradually, with resting pools along the way.

Importantly, the existing headpond above the dam will be maintained at its current level, preserving the flood and ice control the town has relied on for decades. Instead of choosing between fish passage and flood protection, the engineering solution delivers both.

Dam removal and river restoration can be deeply divisive. And yet, Cherryfield residents voted unanimously to support this project. This overwhelming support was the result of years of conversations between conservation partners, town officials and residents to discuss the community's needs, which included flood control, continued alewife harvesting and enhanced public access to the river.

Then, the project was designed to meet those needs, while also restoring a critical pathway

for sea-run fish. With funding secured through a National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration Restoration Center award, the project will be completed at no cost to the town.

“We had many meetings with the Downeast Salmon Federation and Maine Coast Heritage Trust before this vote ever went into place,” said Cherryfield Selectman Corey Smith. “The town voted unanimously. They were well prepared because of the information that was given to the townspeople who attended the meetings.”

The nature-like fishway is expected to boost sea-run fish population recovery by improving access to their natural habitat. Upon project completion, over 500 miles of upstream habitat will once again be open to sea-run fish, reconnecting a river that remains an important stronghold for these species.

The project also includes significant enhancements to a park adjacent to the fishway, including a new play area, restrooms, an amphitheater, a gazebo and a floating dock that will expand public access and strengthen the community’s connection to the river. It serves as a model for community-based conservation, bringing together local government, residents, land trusts, fisheries organizations and federal agencies to design environmental solutions that address community priorities.

On May 23, as community members and conservation partners gather on the Narraguagus River to mark World Fish Migration Day, they will also celebrate the project’s progress: a major milestone in a decades-long effort to restore fish passage, reconnect habitat and strengthen community. Their story offers powerful lessons that can inform the conservation of sea-run fish in Maine and beyond.

“Nature Connects” is a monthly column showcasing conservation stories from people and organizations across Maine. To learn more or suggest story ideas, email .