Back to the Past

What gives with a proposed historic dam in Maine?

By Ted Williams

Fly Rod & Reel, March 2009

Near my fishing camp in New Hampshire's Rockingham County, there's this archeological site said to have been constructed by ancient druids or their precursors. Several large, flat stones have grooves—blood grooves, we are told. Now that the site has been physically restored, a volunteer 501c3 citizens' organization is attempting to restore historical function as well, including the sacrifice of virgins (though only on summer weekends for tour groups). While the organization has yet to find a virgin in the county, I am concerned that a friend of our neighbor's young nieces might be one. Our families have repeatedly suggested simulated sacrifices with inflatable virgins, but the citizen's group has informed us that this would lack authenticity.

I guess I should point out that only the first two sentences of the preceding paragraph are true. I offer the remainder as an allegory for comprehension of a situation currently unfolding on southern Maine's Crooked River. "They're claiming they need to build a dam in the name of authenticity to show how our ancestors screwed up the environment," says conservation activist and Maine Rivers board member Bill Townsend on the topic. But before reading the details you need to understand the history of this river and the lake it feeds and why both are nationally important.

The Crooked River meanders (hence its name) about 50 miles through mostly small villages and big woods from the eastern slope of the White Mountain National Forest south to 30,513-acre Sebago Lake, second largest lake in Maine and home to one of only four native populations of landlocked salmon in the state. All other populations—even the few self-sustaining ones—are the result of stocking. Not only is the Sebago race genetically unique; it is the largest and an important source of broodstock in the United States and even other nations.

About 70 percent of all salmon caught in Sebago were naturally spawned in the Crooked River. Farther north in Maine you can enjoy good fly-fishing for landlocks on Grand Lake Stream and the West Branch of the Penobscot, but these fish eat mostly invertebrates; you'll do well to catch a slim 17-incher. The fish running up the Crooked are smelt-eaters, and it's not unusual to catch five-pounders built like a false albacore. Most of the river is wadeable, and the fish respond well to streamers.

Possibly the first record of a Sebago Lake landlocked salmon is the 1825 diary entry of novelist Nathaniel Hawthorne: "On the way home from Frye's Island, Mr. Ring caught a black-spotted trout that was almost a whale. It weighed, before it was cut open, eighteen and one-half pounds." In 1907 Sebago produced a landlock that weighed 22.5 pounds, still the state record, beating out an even larger fish taken from the Crooked River in 1882 because, as the Maine Fisheries Commissioners reported that year, "A man named Paul is now under arrest for spearing a fish weighing 24 pounds."

Since those early days Sebago's world-famous landlocked-salmon fishery has fluctuated wildly. In 1960 it was nearly ended by the aerial saturation of the Maine woods with DDT. Then, in 1972, the Maine Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife (IF&W) stocked lake trout. The alien predators quickly naturalized, swilling smelts to the point that the salmon population again crashed. Since 1982, when IF&W quit stocking lake trout, managers have been trying to reverse some of the damage by upping lake-trout bag limits and extending seasons. And they're looking into other possible means of control such as gillnets, electro-fishing and water draw-downs.

Following the lead of the state professionals, bucket biologists have illegally unleashed pike (voracious predators of salmon) and, in headwater ponds, landlocked alewives (potentially deadly in that they contain high concentrations of thiaminase, an enzyme that degrades thiamine, thereby killing emerging salmonid fry). Still, in the face of all these insults, Sebago's salmon have somehow managed to survive, even flourish. The reason is the Crooked River.

Like many game and fish departments, Maine's IF&W suffers from multi-personality disorder. In 1972—the very year it nuked Sebago's native ecosystem with lake trout—it widened the narrow breach in the dilapidated Scribner's Mill dam in Harrison. Two years later the agency forced good fish passage at the next and last upstream obstruction, the dam at Bolsters Mill. For the first time in 150 years, landlocks had run of the entire river. The result has been stupendous salmon fishing in both lake and stream.

Enter John and Marilyn Hatch, fresh from the mid-Hudson River Valley where they'd fed their passion for historical renovation by making over a house built in 1798. Driving through Harrison, Maine, they came across this old mill. The door was open, so they walked in. Ed Scribner welcomed them. They told him that this beautiful old site needed to be restored; he agreed. The year was 1975.

With that, the Hatches formed a 501c3 citizens' organization that they called Scribner's Mill Preservation, Inc. and to which Scribner and his two sisters deeded mill and property.

The strong spring flow took out some of the mill's supports because IF&W had widened the breach. "Whether this was intentional or not we don't know," Scribner's Mill Preservation, Inc. president, Roy Clark, grimly informed me. But if IF&W had plotted against the mill, it quickly reversed course, giving Scribner's Mill Preservation, Inc. permission to build a granite barrier to divert water.

As restoration of the building progressed, Scribner's Mill Preservation, Inc. decided to restore historical function as well—in the form of an up-and-down "sash saw" to be powered directly from the river via a water wheel. In order to recreate this historical function, the river will have to be dammed again, so in 2007 the group applied to the Maine Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) to do just that. According to Roy Clark, there won't be any commercial lumber production, just demonstrations of log cutting—mostly for tour groups on summer weekends. But the dam will be there 365 days a year, 24 hours a day.

Anglers, fish managers and environmentalists have pled with Scribner's Mill Preservation, Inc. to forget the dam and simulate water power with a hidden electric motor or even provide real water power by pumping water into a high holding tank. When I asked Clark why his outfit didn't opt for one of these alternatives he explained that it simply didn't like them: "We've concluded that the best way to make this world-class mill authentic is to use real water power."

And I had this exchange with Marilyn Hatch:

"Why couldn't you do all this with electricity? Why do you have to dam a salmon river to make a history lesson?"

MH: "You'd have to understand 1847 technology to really understand why you can't use electricity."

"I understand they didn't have electricity back then. I'm just saying use electricity for a simulation. Why couldn't you run power to the wheel that turns this thing? No one would know if you put the motor underneath the building. People would get the idea."

MH: "We don't have enough kilowatts."

"If you don't have sufficient power, you run a new line. But what about the alternative of pumping water up to a storage tank?"

MH: "That would require fossil fuel."

"Wouldn't that be better than disrupting a salmon stream?"

MH: "I don't believe we're destroying salmon habitat. One person said to run a mill like this with anything more than water power would be like a dead fish up on the wall, not seeing that fish swimming in the river and the joy and excitement of it."

Not seeing fish swimming in the river will be an opportunity that authentic restoration of the mill's historical function will provide, at least according to IF&W. An agency position paper recently released to the public and written by regional fisheries biologist Francis Brautigam reads, in part:

"Fish passage problems will likely develop soon after construction…. Proposed dam construction will inundate 1.1 miles of riverine habitat (under mean annual flow conditions), which currently provides important salmon spawning and nursery functions…. Higher water levels…will enhance species of fish (smallmouth bass, chain pickerel, brown bullheads, largemouth bass, northern pike, etc.) that are significant predators on and competitors with salmon and brook trout, particularly juvenile life stages…. The applicant proposes no mitigation for the loss of salmon spawning and nursery habitat that will be inundated by the dam…. The proposed location of the dam so low in the Crooked River drainage (65 percent of the river's production is above Scribner's) increases the opportunity for predation, particularly on downstream migrating smolts…. Proposed construction…raises considerable concerns regarding potential generation of silt and sedimentation… Depending on the time of year, this proposed diversion will remove between 5 percent (April) and 60 percent (August) of the mean monthly flow from a 600 foot section of the Crooked River, in an area that provides juvenile salmon habitat and serves as a migration pathway for migrating adult salmon…. The applicant proposes the use of a rock ramp fish passage structure, which is highly experimental for such a high value resource. The applicant has not demonstrated where such an experimental structure has worked effectively…. In this day and age, the proposed rebuilding of the Scribner's Mill dam on a Class AA river that supports such a genetically, economically, and recreationally important fishery resource is very disconcerting."

Not, respond the dam proponents, most of whom nurse a special dislike for Brautigam. "The facts are so easily distorted," Roy Clark told me. "And that's the problem we have with Mr. Brautigam. I want to give you a great example of some of the facts we know are not being read correctly." I waited and waited, but he was unable to come up with even one.

"We feel Brautigam has been putting out some pretty rotten stuff," declared John Hatch before quickly passing me off to his wife, the standard and more loquacious spokesperson. Marilyn said this: "Francis Brautigam has been against our project right from the get-go…. He says this dam is going to put Sebago Lake out of business. He reads what he wants to read. He has tried to circumvent this whole application process by having the Crooked River at Scribner's Mill reclassified as AA to stop our project."

The entire river—save existing impoundments such as the one at Bolster's Mill and the area previously impounded at Scribner's Mill—has been designated AA by DEP, Maine's highest river classification and one that precludes new dams. The exemption for the Bolster's Mill dam (which was breached in 1988) was at least understandable in that the communities of Harrison, Otisfield and Bolster's Mill wanted a small impoundment for fire protection.

The exemption at Scribner's Mill, on the other hand, reeks of politics. As Brautigam observes: "The justification responsible for waiving the Class AA designation and associated attainment criteria at the Scribner's site is a bit bewildering, since dam reconstruction could adversely impact the very resources the Class AA designation was intended to protect." What's more, unless the legislature steps in, that exemption is grandfathered.

DEP could and probably should have reviewed the project under the state's Natural Resources Protection Act, in which case environmental impacts would have received careful scrutiny. Instead, DEP chose to review it as part of its hydro-licensing program, which requires no detailed alternatives analysis and attempts to "balance" environmental impacts with public benefits.

Nevertheless, on October 24, 2008, DEP issued a draft order to block the project, stating that, despite the educational and economic opportunities a new dam would provide, these benefits would be outweighed by the harm the dam could do to Sebago's landlocked-salmon fishery.

It's conceivable that the agency will release its final order by the time you read this; but that wouldn't mean a lot. The decision, however it turns out, will likely be appealed to the Board of Environmental Protection, Superior Court or both. "Given the passion for the request to have a dam and also to forbid a dam, the debate could rage for years," DEP's Dana Murch told the Portland Press Herald.

"We expect some kind of compromise that neither side is going to be completely happy about, an IF&W staffer told me. Compromises—as in compromising salmon runs—are also authentic, historical functions of dams. But, as Brautigam points out, "in this day and age" they are "very disconcerting"—especially when they involve the nation's most important landlocked-salmon population. Still, proponents are unmoved and unconcerned. Perhaps this is because, with no exception I could find, they have a vast and impressive misunderstanding of fish.

Consider the proclamations of respected journalist and Maine historian Dan Soucy, the most widely read tub-thumper for re-damming. "Fish ladders," he writes, "have been proven time and again to be more than adequate for the passage of fish over or around obstacles like dams." Yeah, you know—like the ones on the Columbia River system that have presided over the extinction of one salmon stock, the virtual extinction of another and helped place 12 others in 77 populations on the Endangered Species List.

And here's Soucy's lecture on dammed deadwater: "Another aspect to consider is that with the creation of the holding pond, which if I understand correctly will be about eleven acres, will also be another opportunity to develop new fishing opportunities." Yeah, you know—like for sunfish, perch, hornpout, bass, pickerel, pike, fallfish, dace and suckers.

Marilyn Hatch makes Soucy sound almost learned: "In our fisheries report it very clearly states that the impoundment would not be warm and would not support warmwater predators."

My response: "But isn't it pretty clear that a 1.1-mile-long pond is going to produce warmwater predator fish; we kinda know that, right?"

MH: "But the predator fish they found were all juveniles; there were no adults."

Me again: "Juveniles grow up, right?"

MH: "If they want to stay there. I don't know where they go…. They say landlocked salmon do surprisingly well in warm water."

"But you just told me that the impoundment won't be warm."

MH: "It will probably become warmer than the river because it's a larger area."

"But salmon do fine in warm water created by dams?"

MH: "Yes. And only the fittest salmon were able to get over the dams."

"So in that sense dams are a plus, and their removal has weakened gene pools?"

MH: "Absolutely. Because of survival of the fittest."

The first weekend in August Scribner's Mill Preservation, Inc. holds a two-day event called "Back to the Past" featuring: "sawmill demonstrations, tours, craftsmen at work, antique cars, trucks, engines, homestead activities, childrens' events, a pig roast and baked bean 'suppah' and much more." Roy Clark tells me that there's always "a huge crowd—over 900 people," a contention that puzzles me in light of the fact that his outfit's dam application reads as follows: "No appreciable change in volume of traffic is anticipated through this site which is at present sporadic."
Be that as it may, I don't know a single person who doesn't heartily endorse this kind of family fun and these kinds of history lessons. I certainly do. I also submit that there are a few aspects of our past to which we should not go back.

But the dam, explains Roy Clark, "is a great opportunity to preserve a piece of history." That may be so; however, a large population of native, genetically unique landlocked salmon is also "a piece of history," and maintaining a free-flowing Crooked River is a great opportunity to preserve it.

Marilyn Hatch did make one accurate observation. As my interview with her was winding down and as she was recounting all the alleged public benefits of the water-powered saw, she said: "We're doomed to repeat the failures of the past, if we don't realize the history of the past."

I asked her if this might also apply to the conservation of wild, native salmonids.

I didn't get an answer.

Buy Ted Williams' latest book, Something's Fishy, at flyrodreel.com. Ted has written this magazine's Conservation column since 1988.