

Guest editorial: Repairing our rivers

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The lives of Maine people and the socioeconomic history of our state have always been intertwined with the fate of Maine's rivers. Communities across Maine were built next to rivers and our economy was built on the backs of our waterways. Our local rivers and local communities are no exception. Sanford, Alfred, Kennebunk, Kennebunkport would not exist as we know them today without the Mousam and Kennebunk rivers, yet the rivers themselves are vastly underappreciated.

These rivers are integral parts of our communities, flowing through the hearts of our towns, coursing through the pages of our region's history. They provided sustenance for native peoples and fed European colonists. Huge ships would be made on their banks and floated down river to the sea, and later their water would power the textile and shoe mills that provided generations of jobs.

Unfortunately, along with this expansive economic development came the ecological collapse of the rivers themselves. Dams, pollution and over-fishing wiped out our once abundant runs of Atlantic salmon, American shad, alewives, rainbow smelt, sturgeon, American eel and other sea-run fish species. The disappearance of these fisheries in turn led to the collapse of our near-shore ground fisheries, and our river ecosystems suffered from the loss of important biomass and marine nutrients.

In recent decades, we have realized that treating our rivers like open sewers wasn't such a good idea and we have begun the hard work of reversing several centuries of abuse. Fortunately, rivers are resilient ecosystems and improvements in water quality due to the Clean Water Act have made all of our rivers a lot cleaner and healthier. In the past 15 years, we have also seen great success in restoring native sea-run fisheries through stocking fish, removing barriers, installing fishways, and restoring and protecting riverine and riparian habitat.

These ecological improvements in our rivers have paid dividends for riverfront communities. Now, instead of turning their backs to the rivers, communities across Maine are investing in improving their rivers. There is a recognition that vibrant, healthy rivers are assets that will increase economic opportunities for local businesses while also contributing to local quality of life.

The Mousam and Kennebunk rivers, however, are not getting the attention that they merit. There are many problems facing these rivers, but none of these are insurmountable. We can greatly improve the health of these rivers, from their headwaters to the sea, by working together and by viewing these rivers from a different perspective. The environmental, economic, and recreational opportunities that will emerge by restoring these rivers are tremendous.

John R.J. Burrows of Kennebunk is president of Maine Rivers, which will be hosting a special watershed conference on the Mousam and Kennebunk rivers beginning at 9 a.m. Friday, May 29, at the Wells Reserve. For more information and to register, please contact Maine Rivers at 847-9277.