

Maine Rivers conference looks at health and future of local water bodies

Mousam, Kennebunk rivers discussed

By Laura Dolce
ldolce@seacoastonline.com

June 11, 2009 6:00 AM

WELLS — A gathering of state and local officials, scientists and volunteers came together May 29 at the Wells Reserve to discuss the two rivers that have always provided the lifeblood for the area.

Titled "The Mousam and Kennebunk Rivers: Past, Present and Future," the conference featured discussions on everything from the way the rivers used to be, to efforts local communities are making to improve the rivers' health.

Dr. Michelle Steen-Adams, an environmental and ecological historian at the University of New England, spoke about a project 15 of her students completed recently. Working with historical documents, the students were able to determine that the rivers once held large populations of anadromous fish — fish that spend most of their lives in the ocean but come upriver to spawn — such as sea trout, sturgeon, pollock, eel and bass, but that the creation of dams and reservoirs has degraded the rivers and led to the disappearance of certain fish species. Industrialization also has added to the rivers' troubles.

"There were alterations to the water quality," she said, citing leatheroid (a synthetic leather) and textile mills on the Mousam River in Sanford, sawdust from milling, and the shipbuilding industry on the Kennebunk River. "The declines in fish life can be related."

Both of the rivers are classified by the state as Class B rivers, explained Dr. David Courtmanch, the director of the Division of Environmental Assessment, Bureau of Land and Water Quality with the Maine Department of Environmental Protection.

While that puts them below Class A or AA rivers, he said, recent improvements have meant that sections of both rivers are improving every day. Still, he said, challenges remain.

The Mousam River, he said, has 11 dams and three wastewater outfalls.

"That's an incredible density of dams to have on a river," he said.

The Kennebunk River, on the other hand, has only one dam, an overboard discharge area and only the Kennebunkport wastewater plant.

Much of that development could be to blame for the changes in the fish population, said John Burrows, the Maine coordinator for the Atlantic Salmon Federation and the president of Maine Rivers.

Explaining that there were once 12 species of diadromous (living in both fresh and saltwater) fish in the rivers, many of those species are long gone from our waters. Those include the Atlantic sturgeon and striped bass.

"Historically, these species defined our rivers," he said. "Their current status is much, much lower than it had been."

While scientists today are looking for ways to improve the conditions in the rivers, communities, too, are trying to do their part.

"We're trying to balance the need for development with water rights and ecology," said Jim Gulnac, town planner and community development director for Sanford. "We're taking the history lessons and putting them into policy at the local level."

Gulnac said his town is planning to remove sawdust from the town's Number One Pond — sawdust that has likely been there for decades if not longer — to give the town back something it lost long ago.

"Number One Pond is the center of our town," he said. "We're going to remove those pollutants, stabilize the water and make the pond fully usable."

Gulnac said the town is also looking at purchasing the mills and cleaning up those as well.

That was one of the overriding themes expressed throughout the day: that it's things like taking big steps at the local level, as well as taking tiny steps as an individual, that all add up to an improved stewardship of our waters.

"People should become involved in a way that they think is meaningful," said Marie Louise St. Onge, director of the Kennebunk Land Trust, who spoke during a roundtable discussion at the conference.