

## FREE-FLOWING WATERS

Collaborating to Revitalize Human  
and Wildlife Communities

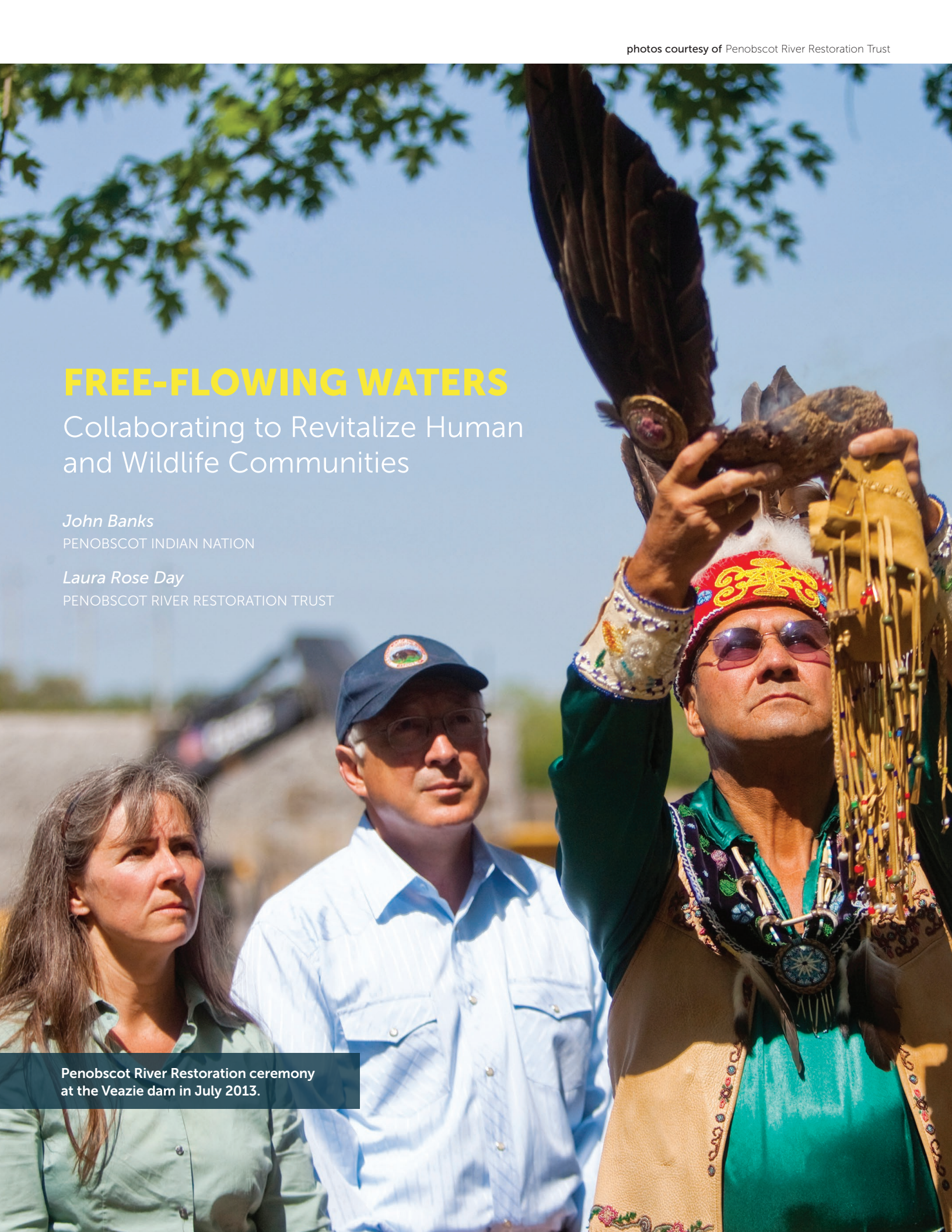
*John Banks*

PENOBSCOT INDIAN NATION

*Laura Rose Day*

PENOBSCOT RIVER RESTORATION TRUST

Penobscot River Restoration ceremony  
at the Veazie dam in July 2013.



# Unlikely partners join forces to restore depleted sea-run fisheries while maintaining hydropower on New England's second-largest river.

On July 22, 2013, as bald eagles soared overhead, Penobscot Indian Nation elder Butch Phillips performed a traditional smudging ceremony to honor the most critical step yet toward the rebirth of the Penobscot River—the breaching of the Veazie dam. Hundreds of people, including members of the Penobscot tribe, elected officials and staff of federal, state, and tribal government agencies, and local residents, watched as large hoe rams cracked concrete and the waters began to flow. What started as a trickle soon became a wide breach through which sea-run fish would be able to migrate freely between the river and the sea for the first time in more than a century.<sup>1</sup>

## The River

The Penobscot is the largest river in Maine and the second-largest in New England. It traverses an 8,750-square-mile watershed from the mountains to the sea, through rural inland communities and the Penobscot Reservation to the Gulf of Maine. In the past, abundant native sea-run fish—Atlantic salmon, river herring, sturgeon—fueled a productive ecosystem and valuable commercial and recreational fisheries. Today, the river is nearly devoid of native fish. The National Research Council, among others, considers opening the river essential for reversing the losses.<sup>2</sup>

The Veazie removal is a milestone in the Penobscot River Restoration Project, an innovative collaboration recognized globally for bringing together unusual partners—the Penobscot Indian Nation, state and federal agencies, conservation organizations, hydropower companies, and communities.<sup>3</sup> After decades of regulatory struggle that merely preserved the status quo, there emerged a focus on rebuilding trust and identifying common interests. Through listening, perseverance, creativity, risk sharing, and giving meaningful consideration to past public input, the parties were able to come up with an approach broad enough to support landscape-scale ecological and energy solutions.

The nonprofit Penobscot River Restoration Trust became the owner of three dams and removed the two nearest the sea—the Great Works dam in 2012, the Veazie in 2013. Next, the Trust will decommission and build a fish bypass around the Howland dam, which blocks access to key inland habitat. In parallel, supported by the Penobscot Trust and other partners, Black Bear Hydro Part-

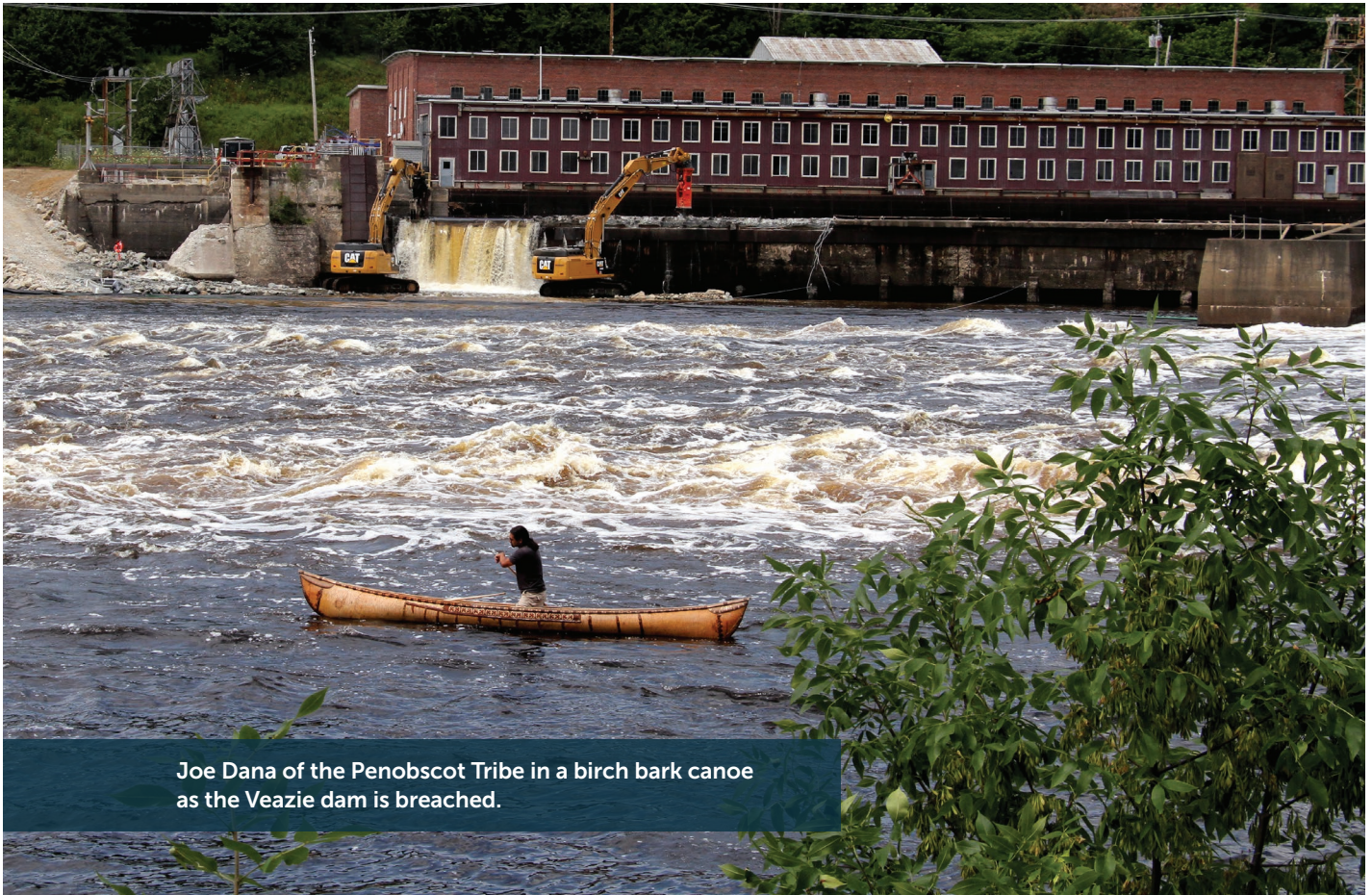
ners LLC has increased power at other locations in the watershed to maintain or even increase overall hydropower generation. It also has improved fish passage at other Penobscot dams. Overall, the project will significantly boost access to nearly 1,000 miles of historic habitat for native sea-run fish, such as river herring, American shad, and the endangered Atlantic salmon.

Rebuilding the Penobscot River fisheries and free-flowing waters is expected to diversify the river's natural assets, benefitting people and wildlife throughout the region.<sup>4</sup> The Penobscot Project already has generated tens of millions of dollars in public and private investment and hundreds of restoration-related engineering, science, and contractor jobs for numerous companies, mostly local. Billions of juvenile fish, especially river herring migrating downstream to the ocean, will once again feed struggling ocean fisheries for cod and other valuable commercial groundfish.<sup>5</sup> Improved water quality will be reflected in more diverse and abundant aquatic life. Benefits to birds and other wildlife will contribute to Maine's multimillion-dollar wildlife-watching business, too.

## Penobscot Indian Nation

The Penobscot Indian Nation and its members cherish the region, which their ancestors have inhabited for more than 10,000 years. Penobscot people consider the well-being of river and tribe to be inseparable. Both the river's name and the tribe's name come from *penawapskewi*, a word describing the lower river's rocky landscape. The tribe sees the restoration of the river's ecological integrity as essential to its way of life. Penobscot Nation Chief Kirk Francis says, "We are the river, and the river is us. So it follows that river restoration and cultural survival are inextricably linked." He describes the Penobscot Project as the most significant conservation effort in the tribe's history.

Under treaties with the United States, the tribe retains sustenance and ceremonial fishing rights. The opportunity to exercise those rights, however, has long been undermined because few sea-run fish were capable of reaching reservation waters, blocked by dams. With the two lower dams gone, sea-run fish can swim to just below the Penobscot reservation for the first time in generations. As native fish species recover, there will be more meaningful opportu-



**Joe Dana of the Penobscot Tribe in a birch bark canoe as the Veazie dam is breached.**

nities for tribal members to exercise the rights that lie at the heart of Penobscot culture.

Likewise, the Penobscot Nation’s aspirations for ecologically and culturally sustainable economic enterprise, such as recreational fishing and cultural tourism, will be enhanced by a river that supports native fish and wildlife as it once did. The new amenities and restored wildlife will benefit both individual guides and programs such as the Wabanaki Cultural Tourism Initiative restoring native fish. The time is ripe to accommodate burgeoning public interest in experiential tourism, with its emphasis on integrating a region’s ecology, history, and culture.

Susan Hammond, executive director of four tribes’ Four Directions Development Corporation, expects the restored river to enrich the region’s outdoor recreation and tourism and showcase tribal culture and history. “For the first time in generations, people can experience culturally significant features, including cascading rapids where Penobscot ancestors once paddled birch bark canoes and rocky ledges where they scraped hides. A Penobscot River where



native sea-run fish and wildlife flourish will be an asset to entrepreneurs, who can offer powerful opportunities for people to enjoy the river’s natural beauty, culture, and adventure.”<sup>6</sup>

### **Local Business**

Scott Phillips is one local entrepreneur. A tribal member, champion whitewater canoe racer, and owner of Northeast Outdoor Sports, he views the newly opened river, with its riffles, rapids, and previously

buried wild features, as a business opportunity.

“We need to do everything possible to promote business and economic opportunities when they arise,” he says. “The paddling, fishing, and other recreational opportunities that will come from a freer-flowing river will be a boon for paddle-sport outfitters, river guides, and many local businesses, and benefit the entire state of Maine. I can’t wait to be one of the first people to paddle an unobstructed river from Old Town to the sea again.” Others anticipate that river recreation will generate competitions and festivals, attracting additional tourism dollars.

A revitalized Penobscot River holds potential for the renewal of nature and community from inland streams to the Gulf of Maine. Atlantic salmon fishing, currently suspended because of perilously low numbers, may resume over time to produce millions of dollars in direct and indirect benefits. Perhaps a catch-and-release version of the tradition of gifting the president of the United States with each year’s first-caught salmon will resume.

Anglers may soon fish in free-flowing waters long closed because of their proximity to the dams. Almost immediately, anglers should be able to land American shad in newly accessible upstream waters. Shad will increase as they use newly accessible spawning habitat. Penobscot alewife populations are already beginning to build. Their large numbers will eventually shield vulnerable, less abundant young salmon from predators, while providing food for myriad fish and wildlife. On the nearby Kennebec, burgeoning alewife populations already support a commercial fishery in the inland town of Benton. And rebounding bald eagle populations on the Kennebec foreshadow increases on the Penobscot.

Enduring, effective collaboration will be needed to fully realize the promise of the Penobscot Project. In fact, the project may have its most far-reaching effect if its approach to marginalizing people’s differences and building solutions from common ground inspires others to overcome complex, seemingly intractable challenges in natural-resource management and beyond.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Alyssa Bothelho, “End and Rebirth on the River: Breaching of Maine Dam, Restoring Salmon’s Passage Unite Many,” *Boston Globe*, July 23, 2013. See also [www.penobscotriver.org](http://www.penobscotriver.org).

<sup>2</sup> National Research Council, “Atlantic Salmon in Maine” (report, Committee on Atlantic Salmon in Maine, 2004).

<sup>3</sup> Project partners include the Penobscot Indian Nation, the Atlantic Salmon Federation, American Rivers, the Natural Resources Council of Maine, Maine Audubon, the Nature Conservancy, Trout Unlimited, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, the State of Maine, and organizations, citizens, and communities in and beyond the Penobscot basin.

<sup>4</sup> Dave Sartwell, “Historic River Reclamation Impacts All of New England,” *GloucesterTimes.com*, September 20, 2011, <http://www.gloucestertimes.com/sports/x7814508/Historic-River-Reclamation-impacts-all-of-New-England/print>.

<sup>5</sup> Robin Alden, “Building a Sustainable Seafood System for Maine: Commentary,” *Maine Policy Review* 20, no. 1 (2102): 93; and Heesun Wee, “Something Fishy Is Going On in the Nation’s Lobster Capital,” <http://www.nbcnews.com/business/something-fishy-going-nations-lobster-capital-8C11040946>.

<sup>6</sup> For more on Four Directions, see John Moore, “Four Directions Community Development Financial Institution: Native American Lending in Maine,” *Communities & Banking* 20, no. 3 (summer 2009).

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