



Providence

Fish return to once-polluted rivers

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PROVIDENCE — Tucked in along the Woonasquatucket River, among the hulking mills that once powered Providence's economy, are the forgotten dams that once powered the mills.

None are used anymore, and they have long sat as roadblocks clogging the river. Not that it mattered — the river, which runs through Providence's West Side, was so polluted that fish couldn't survive, and no sane recreational boater would want to wind around the shopping carts and car parts.

But environmental conditions in the long-dirty Woonasquatucket have rebounded to the point that fish are starting to swim upriver and use the area as a breeding ground again after more than a century of damage done by mills, commerce and debris. It's a breakthrough moment for local riverkeepers.

"A lot of people don't see this river as a wildlife corridor, even though it is," said Jenny Pereira, executive director of the Woonasquatucket River Watershed Council.

Now, to support the local fish populations and create additional breeding grounds, a coalition of state and federal agencies and local landowners is ripping out some of the old dams and building fish ladders around others to allow the fish to swim upstream and claim new areas for spawning.

Behind the Rising Sun Mills, there is a new a 140-foot fish ladder to allow fish to move past the Rising Sun Dam.

Five-hundred feet farther upstream, plans are in place to remove the Paragon Mills Dam altogether, which should allow fish access to 40 acres of new breeding grounds, and help with the persistent floods that plague area residents. Farther upstream, the Atlantic Mills dam, the Dyerville dam and the Manton dam are all targeted for either removal or fish-ladder projects starting next year, allowing fish a clear path to the Johnston border.

The efforts began in earnest early last year when Andy Lipsky, state biologist for the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, went out on the river as part of a group sampling the level of the fish population. They were delighted with what they found upstream near Eagle Square.

"Sure enough, there were lots of alewife bumping their heads up against the dam," Lipsky said.

"Thanks to the Clean Water Act in 1970, we've made amazing strides dealing with the pollutants going in.... But there's still a lot to do in terms of cleaning up our urban rivers."

The Woonasquatucket begins in North Smithfield, at a small pond named Primrose, and travels 15 miles before it meets up with the Moshassuck River in downtown Providence. On its way, it travels through Smithfield, North Providence and Johnston, and then snakes its way through the west side of Providence, winding its way through the Manton, Hartford, Olneyville and Valley neighborhoods before reaching the city's downtown.

Where the Moshassuck and the Woonasquatucket meet, by the Citizens Bank plaza, they become the Providence River, a brief stretch of water that soon flows into Narragansett Bay.

Fish were once plentiful in the river, but as the city's industrial sector grew through the last three centuries, many factories discharged chemical waste and sewage directly into the river. At the same time, dams were erected at at least 17 points along the river to provide power for the textile and machine tools manufacturers.

The Providence Journal archive holds several stories about children getting sick after swimming in the river, and about fish periodically found in the river that were inedible. By the 1950s, it was considered newsworthy when a young boy pulled an 8-pound carp from the Woonasquatucket off Manton Avenue - simply because it was so significant to find a fish at all.

The pollution continued into the 1970s. In 1971, an electronics firm co-owned by then-Lt. Gov. J. Joseph Garrahy admitted that it had dumped mercury, sulfuric acid, chromic acid, ammonium persulfate and copper salts into the Woonasquatucket every working day for six years.

Soon after, environmental regulations began to arrest the flow of chemicals into the river, and the city's industrial sector continued to dwindle.

Now most of those mills are either abandoned or being converted to condos and offices, and the new uses have brought a push to reclaim the river.

Local groups have organized numerous river cleanups in recent years, pulling out the sofas, car batteries, tires, shopping carts and refrigerators that clogged the river. With the junk out of the way, shad, river herring and eel have been spotted in spring and fall fish runs.

Seeing fish in the river is heartening for the riverwatchers - but they hope that they also change the behavior of local residents. Pereira said it's possible that the sight of fish in the river will deter some from dumping trash in the Woonasquatucket, and knowing that it's not a "dead" body of water will motivate residents to treat it better and use it for recreation.

The Rising Sun fish ladder project has cost just under \$400,000, with financial and in-kind donations from Struever Bros. Eccles & Rouse, the Baltimore developer that rehabilitated the Rising Sun Mills.

Ethan Colaiace, a development director with Struever Bros., said the developer is looking forward to having area residents watch the fish runs from the overlook built behind the mill.

"It's part of our mission of turning our face back to the river. It should be those of us who own the land who are stewards of the river," he said.

"When it's all completed it's going to be a pretty cool space," Colaiace said. "You will be able to watch the fish going through this ladder."

"It's always sort of exciting when you see a fish in the Woonasquatucket," Colaiace said.

Soon, he hopes, it'll be mundane.

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