

Conquistadors of the Hopeful

Downeast Salmon Federation attempts to recover salmon on the brink

▲ BRIAN IRWIN

Photo | Steve Scott



► **Maine's Middle River** shares an estuary with the larger Machias River. By removing dams and building fish passageways on the Middle, the Downeast Salmon Federation hopes to help the entire ecosystem recover.

IN 1968, **CLIMBERS** Yvon Chouinard, Doug Tompkins, and friends left Southern California for an epic overland trip to Patagonia in search of unclimbed granite spires. Their expedition extended the limits of adventure and opened new terrain, bringing awareness to the wild lands of South America. Today, fly fishers and other outdoors enthusiasts equate Patagonia with adventure.

Decades later, Chouinard reflected on the expedition and described his team as “Conquistadors of the Useless,” coining the phrase from the title of a book by the famous French climber and author Lionel Terray. While in the eyes of some, the act of climbing a mountain is a useless action without tangible gain, Chouinard is more of a fighter for the good of the environment than a chaser of useless goals. He is perhaps best known for having founded the juggernaut outdoor retailer Patagonia, a corporation with an intensely strong conservation ethos.

Today Chouinard is also more a fly fisher than an alpinist. And his multi-million dollar company has rivers of generosity flowing into the pockets of scores of deserving nonprofit organizations that are striving to protect the environment.

Some of these groups are likely viewed by mainstream America as “Conquistadors of the Useless” as they fight a uphill battle against overpowering odds, sometimes to protect largely unknown species in unfamiliar wilderness areas.

One such organization, the Downeast Salmon Federation (DSF), was recently granted funding by Patagonia’s World Trout Initiative to help recover Atlantic salmon stocks in northern Maine.

The World Trout Initiative was the brainchild of Chouinard and artist James Prosek, and came to inception in 2005 as an effort to “identify individuals and groups that protect native fish, tell their story, and to support their conservation efforts by placing money into their hands. So far, Patagonia has donated \$48 million to grassroots conservation organizations, a good chunk of that toward fish-related advocacy funded by the sale of clothing adorned with Prosek’s fly-fishing artwork.

Middle River

World Trout Initiative funds are being used in northern Maine by the DSF to help recover Atlantic salmon stocks struggling to survive after decades of human impact and river exploitation.

Maine’s Middle River is a small waterway with an almost unidentifiable salmon population. Today it functions primarily as a designated children’s fishing stream stocked with Eastern brook trout.

Many years it’s common for fewer than a dozen salmon make their way to the upper dam, which was built as a mill structure in the 1700s. Below that, another mill hinders migration and, to complicate the watercourse for salmon even more, there are two tide gates at the mouth of the river, blocking its ebb and flow.

The DSF hopes to fix the Middle River, partly because the Middle River pours into an estuary shared by the larger Machias River. The Machias holds potential to be restored as a strong salmon fishery, however there are issues not only with population but with predator-prey interactions.

The DSF believes that by restoring passageways in the Middle River for not only salmon, but other species as well, including the population of alewives (a type of herring) and sea-run brook trout, the Middle River and its



► **Tide gates** at the mouth of the river are just the first obstacle for migratory fish on the Middle River.

Photo | Dwayne Shaw

entire estuary may rebound, providing prey species in the estuary other than Atlantic salmon smolts.

The DSF hopes to successfully lobby for removal of the Middle River tide gates and the lower mill dam. The upper dam will be outfitted with a fishway, allowing salmon and alewives to spawn with fewer obstructions.

The Middle River project is still in its infancy, but Dwayne Shaw, executive director of the DSF, hopes to complete the projects within three years.

“We’re taking a regional, holistic approach,” stated Shaw, “not just focused on salmon, but also other species and interactions within the ecosystem.”

Shaw has been working with the

DSF since 1989 and has previously seen similar projects to completion. In 1990 DSF helped navigate the removal of a dam on the Pleasant River and later another dam on the East Machias (not to be confused with the Machias) River. The latter dam removal project was orchestrated with the assistance of the Air Force National Guard and earned DSF the Coastal America Partnership Award granted by George W. Bush in 2001.

Today, DSF houses its research centers, outreach offices, and hatcheries at the powerhouses previously used by these two, now absent, dams.

The use of hatchery fish to restore a decimated salmon fishery is a controversial topic. Innumerable studies have shown that there is potential for genetic “pollution” of the population

as hatchery fish breed with natives. However as Shaw explained, “sometimes the numbers [of native fish] are so slight that hatchery fish are needed to restore endangered fish to an essentially vacant watershed.”

Patagonia’s World Trout Initiative grant is for dam removal and habitat restoration only, and there are currently no plans to stock the Machias or Middle rivers. Hatchery operations and salmon stocking are limited to the East Machias and Pleasant rivers only. On those rivers, DSF is putting science to the test as it fights to restore the salmon population. And the DSF has a lot of strong science at its disposal, thanks to a new partnership with the North Atlantic Salmon Fund (NASF) based in Iceland.

NASF is a large conservation group that is responsible for the largest quiver of Atlantic salmon restoration projects in the world. Atlantic salmon migrate to the coast of Greenland, as well as other North Atlantic countries, where overfishing since the 1960s has damaged global populations.

The group has successfully acquired fishing rights in Greenland, Canada, Iceland, and other countries in an attempt to restore the population. Perhaps nowhere has its broad base of initiatives been more successful than on the Tyne River in the UK, which has been heralded as the most successful hatchery-based restoration project in the world. With this new partnership, NASF will share finances and strategy with DSF in hopes of generating a rebound on Maine’s rivers that can one day match that on the Tyne.

According to Shaw, the partnership is promising and hopes to restore a wild salmon population that will someday be self-sufficient. His hatcheries will be run and modeled after those run by the NASF, using high flow rates, dark breeding and holding tanks, and native genetics.

The DSF has other projects it hopes to complete simultaneously with the recovery of the Middle and Machias waterways, and the repopulation of the East Machias and Pleasant rivers. The Orange River in Whiting, Maine, has six dams along its path, the first one being at the head of tide. The Orange used to have salmon and other migratory fish, and although the dams, or their replacements, have stood since the 1700s, the salmon


migration was not eradicated thanks to a series of fishways built by the Maine Fish Commission in the 1870s.

Unfortunately, when the primary obstructive dam burned down in the 1940s, it was rebuilt with no fish passage, and migratory fish have suffered immensely. The DSF hopes that by reconstructing the fishway, which it hopes to accomplish within three years, the salmon run will be restored to its fullest potential.

Are They Worth It?

In 2007 I visited the tiny town of El Chalten, Argentina, in the heart of Patagonia. A long gravel road stretched ahead of me toward the towering peaks of the Fitz Roy group, the same group Chouinard came to climb in 1968. In town, gauchos galloped down the dusty strip of tiny, boxy homes weathered the incessant winds that make Patagonia infamous. I climbed on the same glacier ascended by Chouinard and slept to the sound of the same roaring river he did.

When I returned, I stood on the banks of the central Maine’s Kennebec River, at the site of the former Edwards Dam, which was removed in 1999 as part of a restoration project to restore migratory fish, including salmon, striped bass, and shad. I cast my line into roiling eddies, coming tight on a 30-inch striper. As I slipped the fish back into the water it became apparent that humankind may have altered this river forever, not only by placing a dam in it, but by overfishing and overdeveloping it.

But there were salmon in the river that day. And striped bass. The river wasn’t wrecked. It’s too early to say if it will be fully restored, but its life, its fish are back. All the way to the headwaters. All because someone fought, like a conquistador. And had hope that once again the river would run thick with fish. 

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