

Recomposing Dam Decision Making: A Reciprocal Case Study of the Penobscot Restoration

Tyler Quiring,¹ Bridie McGreavy¹
Darren Ranco,² Angie Reed,³
Jan Paul,³ Maliyan Binette,⁴
Brawley Benson,⁵ Caroline
Gottschalk Druschke⁶

1. Communication & Journalism, UMaine
2. Anthropology, UMaine
3. Dept. of Nat. Res., Penobscot Nation
4. Psychology, UMaine
5. International Affairs, UMaine
6. English, UW-Madison

For millennia, the Penobscot River has shaped landscapes and supported life, including the lives of the Panawáhpsekewáyak, the people of where the rocks widen, commonly known as the Penobscot Nation. More recently, dams have controlled this river's flow. As a result, the biology, geology, and culture of this place has been dramatically shifted. In response, the Panawáhpsekewáyak and their allies led a 16-year effort to cultivate restorative justice for the river and the living things that make this watershed their home.

Project Overview

In 2016, the main phase of the Penobscot River Restoration Project (PRRP) concluded. It had been a long-term effort using negotiation, fundraising, public participation, engineering, construction, policymaking, and scientific monitoring to modify or decommission 2 dams and remove 2 others. We are interested in understanding which leadership and collaborative capacities were required to make this project happen and whether something like it could happen again.

To explore these points, we are using a case study (Yin, 1981; Gerring, 2004; Gibbert, Ruigrok, & Wicki, 2008) to organize discourse analysis (Foucault, 1972; Wodak & Meyer, 2001; Carvalho, 2008). This lets us work with diverse data from an array of "discursive sites" (McGreavy, 2016) to explore how ideas circulate so we can identify needs and opportunities for decision making.

Questions

Through our work with the Panawáhpsekewáyak, we have identified key questions such as:

- › How are the Panawáhpsekewáyak and the PRRP perceived and how do these perceptions matter?
- › Why and how do various groups claim ownership over the river or the PRRP?
- › What lessons can we learn from the PRRP and the Panawáhpsekewáyak to support collaborative care for the diverse types of groups, people, other creatures, and places in the watershed?

Data

Our diverse case study materials form a rich archive, including:

- › More than 30 semi-structured interviews with decision makers.
- › More than 500 newspaper articles.
- › Curated information shared online by the Panawáhpsekewáyak and the PRRP.
- › Observations and engagement with the river and the entities (people, other animals, dams, etc.) that exist here.

We call this a **reciprocal** case study, which requires a commitment to work across difference, share information openly and sensitively, and link past, present, and future practices of care. The Penobscot River is our guide, as it circulates energy, possibility, and life. Here, we have literally brought the water and sediment of the River into the fibers of our poster. This is an example of **material rhetoric**, which describes how rivers create, sustain, and change things.

Materials That Matter for Our Engaged Analysis

"The rivers are our lifeblood, both environmentally and economically."
- State employee (from a news article)

"Hydroelectric dams have been the lifeblood of industry."
- State employee (from a news article)

"The only thing a community hates worse than a new dam being put in is removing an existing dam."
- Federal employee (from an interview)

"Most people probably wouldn't even know the Penobscot Nation was involved in [the Penobscot Project] . . . how does that happen?"
- Native nation employee (from an interview)

"We started the [Penobscot] Project."
- Federal employee
(from an interview)

"You have to come to the table with briefcases full of money."
- Native nation employee
(from an interview)

Letting the River Guide

Moving forward, we will continue to draw on the Penobscot River for inspiration as our insights unfold in response to what the world needs. We are currently exploring ways of engaging in anti-colonial education, integrated sustainability science, and participatory media production to link established and new practices of care in, for, and with this watershed.



This panorama taken at dusk shows apartments (left) overlooking a hydroelectric dam in the Penobscot River near Milford, ME (center), framed by Old Town Park and the Boomhouse restaurant (right). To hear the river flowing over the dam, visit: <http://bit.ly/prf2216>

Themes

- › Challenges for decision making:
 - » Differing needs and interests.
 - » Uncertainty about outcomes.
- › Diverse characterizations of the PRRP:
 - » Its emergence (whose idea was it and how did it start?).
 - » Its process (how did the collaboration go and why?).
 - » Its results (was it a success, failure, both, neither?).
- › Metaphors matter for river restoration.
- › Social and ecological justice issues remain.

Emerging Questions

These materials and experiences are leading us to new questions, including:

- › How do modes of control (colonialism, water management, etc.) constrain ecologies?
- › How might long-term flows of stone, water, and cultural practices cultivate resilience?
- › How can we make collaborative decisions within ecological collectives?

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References



River audio

