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MAINE VOICES: Barry Dana

State, Penobscot Nation can manage river

One week ago Monday, I went where no other Penobscot chief has ever gone. For the first time since the inception of Maine as a state in 1820 we addressed its elected leaders within the chamber of the House of Representatives.

For the first time in 182 years, the leaders of the Penobscot and Passamaquoddy tribes spoke directly to the Legislature, governor and chief justice. This is remarkable, and long overdue, even more so considering that less than two years ago, the three leaders making this address were very close to being jailed for trying to protect our waters and our rights.

I believe this can be the start of a new era in tribal/state relations. Relationships are based on communication and it important to communicate with the people of Maine the absolute necessity of the protection of our waters for the benefit of all the people of Maine, Penobscot and Passamaquoddy, Indian and non-Indian alike. This is an issue that can be ignored no longer.

It was once told to me by an elder the before there was a river, there were streams from the upland to the valley. But one day, the water in the valley became a trickle and it disappeared and the people grew thirsty. A young hunter went to find what had happened. He entered the forest and walked for days until he came to the place where the streams converged, and there he was: Kei Cekwalis, a giant frog.

The frog grew bigger and bigger as it lapped up the little streams. The people sent for Gluskabe, our hero. Gluskabe followed the trail and when he came to the frog he called out, "There are others who are thirsty too. You must learn to share."

"I won't stop," croaked Cekwalis, "because and I am the biggest and most powerful, I can do what I want."

Gluskabe pulled up a giant white pine, and lifting it high over his head he brought it down, striking the frog on the back. Kei Cekwalis burst into a thousand pieces. The water shot up into the air and landed in the deep furrow in the ground the tree had made and the water began to flow. And that is how the Penobscot River came to be.

For centuries, the history and culture of the Penobscot Nation have been shaped by our direct daily interaction with the powerful, moving force of nature known as the Penobscot River. For this reason, my people have always viewed the regulation and protection of our natural resources as our obligation, our stewardship to Mother Earth.

We have a deal: Mother Earth provides for us and we protect her. This traditional value goes beyond laws and regulation. This is a deal that transcends governments, profits and the perception of power. This is a relationship our people will never break.

Our rivers are not just a resource, they are sacred. Sacred to the Penobscot, the Passamaquoddy, the Maliseet, the Micmac and all the people of Maine. Thus the enforcement of the Clean Water Act is absolute and must be addressed. The daily lives and health of people who live along the Penobscot River from Millinocket to Searsport must be protected. This is too important to leave to the usual political processes.

I believe we can make progress on this extremely important issue. We have a pledge from Gov. King to give the tribes a useful and substantial role in the process of waste water discharge permits affecting our reservations.

On behalf of the Penobscot Nation, I commend him for that pledge. But it is now time to turn this into a real agreement with real terms, and most importantly real enforcement. I pledge to work on a government-to-government basis with the governor and Attorney General Steven Rowe to find common ground on this issue, and find a solution that benefits all of Maine.

The quality of water is too important to ignore for another minute. We must have high standards for the cleanliness of our water, including adequate protection for all those who rely upon these waters, the people of my tribe, the people of Maine and all life forms living within the river's ecosystem.

These are our relationships; we are all connected, and to protect this connection for now and forever means high standards must be set and they must be enforced.

Our lives are at stake, our environment is at stake and the reputation of the state of Maine is at stake. As leaders we all have an obligation to protect our most precious and sacred resource.

Barry Dana is chief of the Penobscot Nation.