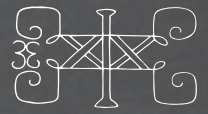


# A River Runs Through Us



written by Butch Phillips, Tribal Elder, Penobscot Nation



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*I was born and raised on the Penobscot River. Growing up on Indian Island the river was our playground. I saw the river at its very worst. It was literally an open sewer used for disposal of all waste from the bordering towns and mills. For the past 30 years, I've watched with optimism the efforts to clean up the river and to restore the historic salmon runs. As a Penobscot Indian, I have a deep personal feeling for this river. During my many hunting and fishing or canoe trips on the river, I was always aware that I was traveling on the same water and hunting and gathering in the same places that my ancestors have for thousands of years. I often visualize the birch bark canoes slowly making their way upriver to some ancient destination. I am reminded that the bones of my ancestors are buried here and their spirits are still here all around us. It creates a very special feeling, a feeling of spiritual connectedness with my ancestors and the river. The People of the Penobscot have always believed that this river was our life-blood. In honor of our Ancestors, and for the protection of the future generations, we must continue the efforts to restore the sacredness to the river.*

*Because of the long-lived nature of contaminants in the river, the loss of our fisheries, and the long-term impacts of pollution on our culture, this story should be included in our history. This story incorporates lessons from the past into a contemporary environmental and cultural message.*

*~ Butch Phillips*



**A long time ago the People lived along this river,** as we do still now. We take our name “Burnurwurbskek” from a place on the river, and later the entire river took its name from us. Our ancestral homeland was a vast network of rivers, lakes and streams that connected the land with the ocean. In the center of this land stands Katahdin, our sacred mountain, that watches over our land and guides the people while on the river. The People have been here since time immemorial. They lived in accordance to the rhythms of the seasons, fishing, hunting and gathering in their customary places along the river. They have reverence for the land that not only supports the animals, fish, insects, trees and plants, but provides The People with physical and spiritual nourishment as well as aesthetic sustenance. The People lived in harmony with Mother Earth while still utilizing the land, plants and animals. The bounty of Mother Earth was to be used but not exploited.

Back then, the river was free flowing according to the incline of the land, forming rapids, gravel bars, and islands on its way to the ocean. Its flow was altered only by the rains and the occasional beaver dam on the tributaries. It was clear and pure, clouded only by the spring freshet and the occasional autumn rain. Fish ascended the river from the ocean in great numbers and were an important part of The People's diet. The People lived according to the seasons, and moved several times using the river as their highway to the family hunting and fishing grounds. The river was treated as a sacred, living being, to be respected, because it was the life blood of The People. They offered prayers and medicines to appease the spirits for their protection, guidance and sustenance.

Because The People lived and traveled on the river, they were canoe people. They made and perfected the birch bark canoe that Glusgabe (our cultural hero and teacher) had taught them to build. Glusgabe showed The People how to make bows and arrows for hunting and spears and nets for fishing. He told them how one should live peacefully within the family group and how to live harmoniously with the creatures on Mother Earth, and to honor the ancient practices of conservation of the bounty. They learned that they must always consider the consequences of their actions and how it will affect, not only tomorrow, but the next seven generations. They lived by the belief that if you disrupt the harmony of the Sacred Circle of Life, you will eventually harm mankind. Life for The People was difficult at times, but they were content within the Sacred Circle of Life.

One day a canoe stopped by the village. A family was returning from a distant coastal camp and brought some alarming news. They told of a big canoe with sails that had been seen near the mouth of the river. The men had light-colored skin and wore strange clothing and spoke in a very different language. At first the strangers were greeted with cautious acceptance and apprehension, but later The People welcomed them in the traditional way and gave them food and furs. The strangers in return, gave gifts of beads, metal pots, knives and cloth, all of which were gratefully accepted because these things would make life much easier for the native people.

More ships came and brought more people. At the ancient camping place of The People, the land was cleared and houses were built. Initially, The People were willing to share the land with the newcomers and taught them how to survive off the land. But the Europeans had a different belief about the treatment of the land. They wanted more and more and then they claimed ownership of it. As these tiny settlements grew into villages and towns, the trees were cut to build more houses, the ground was plowed to grow crops to feed the ever increasing population. The newcomers showed no respect for the land or The People. The ancient hunting and fishing areas were being taken and destroyed and wild game was becoming scarce. The People realized that an ancient prophecy was about to come true. They remembered when a long time ago, an elder of the tribe had a vision and told of a tall ship arriving from the direction of the rising sun. The ship would bring men with light colored skin and with them would come a change to the land and to The People.

As the Europeans pushed their way further inland, they discovered a vast untouched wilderness where the trees grew to unimaginable size and numbers. They soon realized that the trees could be harvested along the river and then floated down the river to the villages to be sawn in lumber. Almost over night, the river that once was the highway for The People, was now clogged with floating logs. As more and more lumber was sought and cut, the more the character of the land and river changed. The once dense, almost impenetrable forest was being thinned at an alarming rate. The sun was shining into the swamps for the first time in countless generations. The search for lumber pushed further and further inland, until no area was left untouched, no matter how remote. The solitude and the sacredness of ancient family hunting grounds were lost to the cutting of the forests and the disrespect for

the land. Not only was the creatures' habitat being destroyed, they were being driven out or killed in large numbers. The moose, and the caribou went away. The wolf, and the beaver went away. The harmonious Sacred Circle of Life was broken.

Dams were built on the tributaries of the river to aid floating the logs from distant lands. Near the villages and towns, bigger dams were built to power the saw mills which processed the logs into lumber for the world. On the streams where an occasional beaver dam had aided the passage of canoes, there now stood much larger dams which impeded canoe travel. Later dams were built to provide electric power to the paper mills, factories and the towns along the river. The main river was dammed, creating lakes and flooding large areas of land, including some of our ancient burial sites. Some dams diverted the river, creating dry ways where the water had flowed freely for eons. The dams not only altered the temperature and

flow of the water and flooded fish spawning areas, they blocked the once great migration of salmon, shad, sturgeon and alewife and other fish that were an important food source for The People. The People who once depended on these fish for their sustenance, now had to find other means of survival. The salmon, shad, went away. The sturgeon and the alewife went away. The Sacred Circle of Life was broken.

Everything that was considered as waste went into the river. Bark from the logs and sawdust from the mills covered the bottom of the river, preventing plant

life and killing the insects so necessary to the fish and waterfowl. The factories, mills and villages dumped vast quantities of sewerage, pollutants and poisons onto the river without considering the ill effects it would have on river, the creatures or The People.

The river became an open sewer. The resident fish, the pickerel, white perch, eels and others were no longer safe to eat because their flesh was contaminated and were a threat to The People and the creatures. The eagle and the osprey went away. The Sacred Circle of Life was broken.

In the old days when The People were faced with a serious problem, they would summons Glusgabe, to use his wisdom and his special powers to help his people in time of need. But this time, Glusgabe didn't respond as he always would in the past. He knew his powers could not compete with those of the towns, the large landowners, industries, and the state government. Glusgabe went away



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also. The Sacred Circle of Life was broken. The People appealed to the white man's government to protect their land, river, fishing rights and their health, but their voices fell on deaf ears. The health and the culture of the Indian people were far less important than the riches and the progress of the non-Indian population. The pollution continued and the sacred water that the ancestors had protected, cared for and blessed, had lost its spiritual power and had become a serious health risk to The People. The ancestors mourned the destruction and they wept, but the purity of their tears could not cleanse their precious river. Native elders reminded The People of the ancient belief that if you harm any portion of the Sacred Circle of Life, you will eventually harm yourself. The People heeded the warning and went away from the river also. That special connection to the river faded. The Sacred Circle of Life was broken.

Our culture, which was based on a healthy environment and had evolved over hundreds of generations, was changed in just a few short generations.

Because of the many changes to our environment, we could no longer depend on the river for everyday existence and we adapted to a different way of life that over time had a direct effect on the culture. The culture suffers when we can not practice the old ways and pass them on to the future generations. The culture suffers when we cannot learn the lessons of the ways that have sustained our people since time immemorial, and The People are weakened when the young no longer seek the wisdom of their elders. The culture

suffers when practicing the traditions can cause harm to the health of The People.

Former Chief Dana of The Penobscot Nation said: "Mercury, dioxin, and other pollutants have entered our water, our air, our fish, our wildlife, our plants and thus our bodies. What effect will this have on our genetic code and our future generations? As indigenous people of this sacred homeland, with this river running through our blood, we have the right to secure the survival of our culture. But to do so, we endanger our health. By continuing to eat the fish and wildlife, by continuing to consume the plants as both food and medicine, we put at risk the very way of life we seek to preserve."

Federal legislation such as the Anadromous Fish Restoration Act, the Clean Water Act, and other important federal environmental programs, provided the incentives to begin the restoration of our rivers. Pollution discharge standards for the mills were set, waste water treatment plants for towns and factories were built; fish passage on dams, both upstream and down, was added or improved; and the

driving of logs on Maine's rivers was stopped. Regulations were passed banning certain pesticides and other hazardous chemicals; wood harvesting practices were set for the first time; brooks and streams were protected from damage; and environmental impact studies were required for construction projects. Slowly the river showed signs of cleansing itself. The river is no longer clogged with logs; pollution has declined; the clarity of the water improved, and it no longer had a foul odor. The moose and the beaver came



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## Oral History: Voices from the Past Shape our Vision for the Future



Before there was a written language, Native People depended on the voices from the past for their history. These stories were usually told by the elders during the long winter months as the family members were gathered around the fire of the wigwam. The oral history would relate origin stories, family history, customs, rituals, various skills, humor and teach proper behavior and morals. There was always a specific purpose for the story, but many different lessons were learned from the story. Sometimes the listener was left to ponder the lesson that was intended. Members of the tribe or clan were usually referred to as "The People." Other tribes were referred to by a name descriptive of their home location or their unique customs. Time was not relevant to the story. Most stories usually began with simply "a long time ago" and events that happened hundreds of years ago, might be interpreted by the listener to have taken place during the elder's lifetime. The story may be told by different people and the method of presentation may differ, but the contents and the purpose of the story remained intact, to be passed along to the next generation.

*Double curve symbols courtesy of Penobscot Indian Nation Cultural and Historic Preservation Department.*

back - the eagle and the osprey came back. Efforts are underway to remove two dams and improve fish passage on another to allow salmon, shad, alewife, sturgeon and other anadromous fish to return to our reservation waters and their ancestral spawning grounds.

Today, the river is a symbol of autonomy for the Penobscot Nation. Canoes can once again be seen traveling up the river for hunting, gathering, recreation, and spiritual purposes. The people are once again coming back to the river and uniting to strengthen the restoration efforts. We have formed partnerships with federal, state and local governments, industry, and environmental groups. Because of the combined efforts and successes of these groups, the Penobscot has become a model for river restoration.

Today, there is national interest in the Penobscot River, not only for the progress that's been made to clean up the river, but because of an unprecedented project to re-balance hydro power with fish restoration, and other social,

ecological, and cultural issues. The Penobscot River Restoration Project will remove the first two dams above tidewater, and enhance fish passage in others, that will restore the ancient connection to upstream spawning areas for 11 anadromous species.



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This is a unique partnership of power companies, sports and environmental groups, the Penobscot Nation, the people of Maine and the federal government. The Penobscot Nation is very grateful for the cooperation of our dedicated partners and others who made this project possible. We are all dedicated to continue these efforts in order to have a safer and healthier river for the future generations of all Maine people.

The Penobscot Nation is committed to continue our efforts until the fish, wildlife and plants are safe to eat, and the sacredness is restored to the river. Only then, will our culture be whole again. Only then, will harmony be restored within the Sacred Circle of Life.

*A River Runs Through Us* was presented at the "History of the River" forum, part of a series of forums about the Penobscot River Restoration Project that were coordinated by Eastern Maine Development Corporation during the winter of 2005. For more information on this unprecedented collaboration, please visit the project web site:

[www.penobscotriver.org](http://www.penobscotriver.org)