Fish Passage

CONSERVING AMERICA'S fisheries

Early in the history of the United States, thousands of culverts, dikes, water diversions, dams and other artificial barriers were constructed to impound or redirect water for irrigation, flood control, electricity, reservoirs and transportation. All of these changed the natural features of countless waterways, blocking the natural migration of fish either to historic habitat or to spawning grounds.

photo: USFWS

Today, an estimated 2.5 million artificial barriers, including dams greater than six feet in height, exist throughout the country. Many of them no longer serve their original purpose and were abandoned years ago.

That provided the impetus for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to launch its Fish Passage program in 1999, a voluntary, non-regulatory effort that provides money and technical assistance to remove barriers that are impeding the movement of fish and contributing to their decline or extinction.

Fish Passage has become one of the Service's most popular efforts. The program embraces partners from every level of government and a wide range of private and civic conservation groups, most of which add significant matching funds that help stretch taxpayer dollars, and which allow citizens at a number of different levels to become directly involved in the kind of restoration work that can have important benefits.

Natural flows and temperature have been restored for trout, herring, striped bass, shad, sturgeon, salmon, minnows and darters. Anglers and commercial and subsistence fishers benefit from larger fish populations, which are distributed across more available habitat. Fish-eating birds such as eagles, osprey and kingfishers have more forage, and even bears, otters and mink benefit from improved fish populations – and so do anglers.

There are spectacular removals, such as the breaching of Embrey Dam on Virginia's Rappahannock River by the Corps of Engineers in February 2004, to the repair or removal of culverts and other water diversions. Altogether, the Service identified 436 barriers for removal, at a cost of $44 million. The Service and its partners will complete those projects as funding becomes available.