

Revisiting Rewilding in the Allagash

by Jym St. Pierre

June 23, 2022

In 1999, I paddled the Allagash Wilderness Waterway (AWW) with a group of friends from the headwaters to where it kisses the St. John River. The experience was invigorating (paddling big lakes, narrow streams, and a wide river), inspiring (seeing moose, eagles, trout), and alarming (hearing trees being clearcut inches beyond the 500-foot beauty strip, seeing the proliferation of motorized access to a wilderness area). I saw the beauty of the waters and surrounding wildlands that had inspired state and national leaders decades earlier to secure some legal protection for the AWW. But I also learned about how the State was failing to live up to its promise to steward the area as a nationally significant wildland gem.

The original 1966 state law creating the AWW specified that the public zone along the waterway was supposed to be managed for “maximum wilderness character.” In 1970, the AWW was given additional recognition as the first and longest state-managed, federally designated Wild waterway in the national Wild and Scenic Rivers System. During the 1960-70s, progress was made to restore the wild character of the AWW under the guidance of dedicated superintendents, such as Leigh Hoar and Tim Caverly. However, in the 1980-90s, management had drifted due to directives by political appointees, and anti-wilderness uses expanded climaxing in construction without a permit of a massive dam/bridge.

I returned from that Allagash immersion determined to organize voices to push back against the gale force winds of gnawing chainsaws and misplaced motors. An invitation I sent to conservation colleagues brought together activists from The Wilderness Society, Natural Resources Council of Maine, Appalachian Mountain Club, Maine Audubon, Allagash Alliance, Trout Unlimited, Sierra Club, Outward Bound, and many others, including guides, academics, and Allagash lovers. We named our collective voice Citizens to Protect the Allagash (CPA). I liked the allusion to Certified Public Accountants. We were ready to hold legislators, bureaucrats, and landowners accountable.

During the next several years, there were big battles with the agencies, in the legislature, and in the courts. In 2002, I got the Allagash named as one of the Most Endangered Rivers in the U.S. For a time, there was movement to once again improve the wild character of the AWW. A friend and I made many forays in the Waterway in the early 2000s to document the beauty and concerns. We visited and rated each of the more than 80 campsites. We planned to write a better guidebook than was available.

But in 2006, forward movement suddenly stopped when anti-wilderness advocates and politicians prevailed. A Maine law reversed efforts to enhance the wilderness character, a dam built without a permit was allowed to stay, a new bridge spanning the AWW was erected, and the feds failed to provide a meaningful check on state

mismanagement. I lobbied the Governor's staff to get him to veto the bill but protection of the Katahdin Lake lands was happening at the same time and they did not want to jeopardize support for that by angering northern Maine legislators. In 2008, again I got American Rivers to name the Allagash one of the ten Most Endangered Rivers in America.

Since then, there has been both progress and retrenchment in protection of the extraordinary character of the Allagash Wilderness Waterway. The State hired a smart Waterway manager and launched a strategic planning effort that generated good ideas. A new foundation raised funds and produced a couple of excellent reports on the natural features and cultural history. But there has also been backsliding. There are more points than ever providing motor vehicle access for day use to what was originally envisioned to be a multi-day, nonmotorized wilderness experience. Excessive logging continues in the Mile Zone that buffers the thin protected shoreland strip along the Waterway. Moose, one of the iconic species coveted by wildlife watchers, have been over "harvested" and devastated by ticks. And even winter no longer offers a respite with snowmobiles crisscrossing the frozen woods and waters and ice fishing shacks crowding some of the lakes.

In late May, I spent nine days again paddling the Allagash Wilderness Waterway with three friends. The night before our adventure, we stayed in the village of St. Francis at Pelletier's. Owner Norman L'Italien told us how he married into the business decades ago, how crazy busy he was last year shuttling people into the woods and rescuing those who broke down, how this year he hoped for merely an insanely normal amount of business. In the morning, we drove 15 minutes further up the road and, with help from Sue and Wade Kelly, loaded our boats and gear onto an oversize pickup. Sue shuttled us four hours deep into the Maine Woods.

At Johnson Pond, under an overcast sky, we unloaded canoes and gear, said good-by to Sue, and secured tents, fishing rods, and drybags full of clothes and food into the boats. After skimming across the pond we snaked down a narrow brook into Allagash Stream to Allagash Lake. As one of the very few sizeable lakes in Maine legally protected from motorized intrusions Allagash Lake is extraordinary. After dinner, sitting alone on the shore, the memory of my first night there nearly a quarter century ago sprang back when I had laid on the sandy beach and dropped into the dark night sky full of fixed and shooting stars.

The second day, high waters carried us downstream to a campsite at Little Allagash Falls and a brilliant sunset. The next morning, a flow of nearly 500 cubic feet per second flushed us down the rest of Allagash Stream into Chamberlain Lake where we spent hours muscling canoes against strong headwinds through two-foot seas to Lock Dam. After portaging around the dam and checking the nearby cabin where Dorothy Kidney Boon wrote about living "away from it all" in the Allagash woods (1957-1985), we reached Pillsbury Island in Eagle Lake. Our home for the night was the Thoreau campsite on the west side, but Henry David Thoreau actually camped on the other side. For years, I tried without success to get the State to designate the correct site,

but the bureaucracy moves very slowly. I celebrated the start of my 8th decade that evening with my friends. Having read about four guys who claimed they were abducted at night near there and were taken into alien space ships to be probed, I wondered if we would have a close encounter. But the only unusual event was the sound of a chainsaw in the next campsite when a gang of yahoos were cutting up trees. Oh, and a glimpse of Thoreau's ghost.

Early the next morning, the guys at the adjacent campsite took off in their motorboats. They left a campfire burning full of plastic utensils, sponges, food wrappers, a huge hunk of meat and other trash. I doused the fire. After breakfast we canoed a short distance down the lake to inspect the biggest attraction in the Allagash: the remains of a tramway and railroad built nearly a century ago by Canadian industrialists to move wood between watersheds. It had been some years since I had been to the tram and train. For a long time, the site was accessible only by water, but in the past half century forestry companies have built a massive road system throughout the woods. I was quoted in an article in the April 2022 issue of Down East magazine emphasizing that the change has been tectonic. Easy access has turned the Allagash locomotives into a popular day use destination. People drive cars in summer and snowmobiles in winter to get there. An illegal walking trail was cut from the closest road. The Maine Bureau of Parks and Lands tried to block and unflag it, but could not stem the tide. Eventually, BPL improved the trail and erected a sign at the trailhead. The trains, especially, are an impressive sight to behold and to imagine what it took to get them there through the wilderness. A dozen miles of rail line were built in the 1920s to expedite getting the wood out. By the 1930s, the endeavor crashed when the economy went into depression.

Back on the water, we cruised past Farm Island. One time, years ago, I stopped there for lunch. A family from Germany in an inflatable boat pulled up. Suddenly a guitar materialized and the father serenaded our lunch with classical music. Next stop was the Pump Handle, a hill toward the north end of Eagle Lake. We hiked to the top for a view of the dark waters and greening trees of the Allagash, and the outline of faint mountains at Katahdin in the hazy distance. Our plan was to press on to be closer to Churchill Dam so we could ride the water release in the morning, but plans change. Instead, we set up tents and tarps at Zeigler campsite just in time for a massive thunderstorm to deliver buckets of rain.

Sunday morning dawned overcast. At the north end of Round Pond we paused at one of the bridges that span the waterway. A proposed boat access point adjacent to John's Bridge was a flashpoint two decades ago between conservationists who wanted to hold to the original vision of the AWW and those who wanted more and more vehicular access. As with so many of the struggles over intrusions into the Wilderness Waterway, the enviros got their way, but not because we had more leverage, only because a key state employee did not want to be dragged into another legal fight. I wanted to see if the site of the proposed boat ramp was still intact woods. It was. The only traffic on the bridge was a fellow in a pickup hauling a refrigerator. The only traffic in the water was a beaver searching for trees to chew.

The skies had largely cleared by the time we reached Churchill Dam in mid-morning. A young ranger, Nolan Jacobs, cheerfully shuttled our gear downstream to the site of the former Bissonette Bridge so we could run Chase Rapids in empty canoes. My captain in the stern steered us through the foaming waters nearly perfectly. Nearly. In the bow, I had to make a few split-second decisions about avoiding rocks. We only nicked a couple. Then more rips, more rocks, more fun. Finally, we floated into Umsaskis, one of the prettiest lakes in the waterway, and settled into Chisholm Brook campsite.

Next morning, we paddled across the river to wander through the meadows for a while. I could identify the red-wing blackbirds and Canada geese, but my companions were intrigued by the songs of many other more exotic bird species.

To inventory the fishery, we tossed fly lines into the water near the Ledges on the east shore of Umsaskis Lake. Soon R, who was fishing deep, had a 16" brook trout. Jon added weights to his line and hooked a couple of his own. The fish ignored my floating line. Before saying good-bye to Umsaskis, we stopped near the bridge at The Thoroughfare. I knocked on the door of the ranger cabin, but my friend, Ranger Bob, was away on his days-off shift. I left him a note about our fishing success (except mine).

Below Umsaskis is a wide, long sheet of water unsurprisingly named Long Lake. We stopped at Grey Brook campsite for lunch, then pushed on against a headwind. I tried casting a line at the mouth of Chemquasabamticook (pronounced Ross) Stream. All the fishes remained safely hidden, but I swear I heard bubbly laughing at my incompetence. I quietly cursed their mockery as we turned our vessel into Harvey Pond. At the far end are the remains of another ancient river driving dam.

I have camped at Long Lake Dam campsite before and though it was still early afternoon, we decided to settle there again. Once the boats were unloaded, tents and tarps erected, sleeping bags and pads unfurled, and firewood gathered, there was time to play. I whipped my fly into the brisk water below the remnants of the old logging dam. No takers. My companions washed off the sweat of the day. Suddenly four fellows in a couple of canoes materialized, but they didn't stay long. I watched as they lined their canoes through the rapids and floated north toward the horizon.

Finally, we were truly into the river section of the Allagash Waterway. Monday morning, we slipped the boats into the widening water. The clear sky blushed blue, the emergent leaves glowed phosphorescent green, the sun on the river sparkled a million diamonds. We pulled the canoes ashore on an island for fishing, photographing, and just giving thanks for being. Further downstream, I knew was Henderson Bridge, another point of contention. About 20 years ago, the bridge needed fixing. I and a few colleagues lobbied to have the bridge and an adjacent boat launch removed to restore a bit of wildness to the waterway. We lost. The bridge and boat ramp stayed. Anglers love to put their motor boats in next to the bridge for easy access to Round Pond just downstream. Indeed, as we paddled by a dozen guys were preparing to launch motor canoes.

We floated into the pond beneath tall arching elms, some of the last survivors of their generation. Then suddenly a fierce wind blew up. How is it that when paddling south on the Allagash lakes we had had a headwind, and now paddling north we had a headwind? I would have liked to hike up Round Pond Mountain. It had been at least 15 years since I last tramped to the summit. However, the consensus was that staying with the sunny water was more enticing than fighting misquitos and blackflies in the dark woods.

Below Round Pond we reentered the river. More rapids, more wind, but no more lakes. We pulled into the Turk Island campsite for lunch. No wind. Calm. R sprawled on the grass. Soon, so did T. J went stomping into the woods in search of something, maybe forgiveness. I cast my line. Immediately, I caught a small fish. Finally, I thought, I was not going to be skunked. Then, I realized, it was stupid ego. I released a beautiful spotted brook trout and watched it swim away into the river rapids.

With lunch and sunbathing and fish teasing done, we slipped into the current and navigated several more miles of crystalline water. Hosea B campsite passed on our port side. Quickly we were at Five Fingers where there are three campsites. Five Finger Brook West was taken. At Five Finger Brook South, Trevor O'Leary, a native son of Allagash village and the resident ranger at Michaud Farm, was shoring up the outhouse. We decided to check Five Fingers Brook North. It seemed less appealing, so we backtracked to the South campsite. Trevor was just leaving. He told us how much he loved his job. On that sunny Spring afternoon, it was easy to see why. Later, as T and R made dinner, I stood on the shore and gawked at another heartbreakingly beautiful sunset.

After breakfast Tuesday morning, we were back on the river. Before long, we were passing Bass Brook. Memories flooded my mind of the time J and I camped there a couple of decades ago. On that misty morning I photographed him alone in the canoe disappearing into the fog. That image was later used on a poster created to celebrate the magic of the Allagash Wilderness Waterway. At Cunliffe Depot I checked the rusting remains of early logging era artifacts. At Michaud Farm, we took another break. A pair of all-American fellows with US flag shirts were setting up a bar-b-q for vets coming downriver. A flotilla of motor canoes putt-putted by, the gang we had seen putting in at Henderson Bridge. J meandered to the ranger cabin. I took pictures. R put down his camera to pick up his sketch book.

Back on the water, we glided among bright green islands to Allagash Falls. There is a mandatory one-third mile portage around the 40-foot high cascade unless one is suicidal. Humping the canoes and gear took several trips back and forth. In the process, R realized he had left his camera at Michaud Farm. In a conversation with the motor canoe gang, one guy said he remembered seeing it and would get it to a ranger. (The camera was found and a few days later shipped back to R. Good to know there are still honest people.)

On our last night in the AWW we camped at Big Brook East. Yet another sublime sunset. In the morning, we picked our way through several series of rips as we finished the last of the hundred miles of our little adventure. A few modest houses with million-dollar views perched along the high shore indicated that we had left the protected lands of the Waterway. It was barely 10 o'clock when the bow touched dry land on the north shore of the Allagash a short distance above where it meets the St. John River. Boats were emptied, cars were retrieved. One more stop. Lunch in Fort Kent. As we sat outside near a monument to "America's First Mile," the northern beginning of US Route 1, overlooking the larger St. John River and the town of Clair in Canada on the far side, I had an urge to visit that foreign country. But Covid restrictions made that challenging and without my passport it would have been tough to get back into the US. Anyway, I had an even greater urge to head back to Johnson Pond and to start down the Allagash Wilderness Waterway again. Maybe next time it will not be as long between Allagash adventures.