

Telstar Regional High School

The Significance of the Androscoggin River

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Throughout history, rivers have played a substantial role in the progression of humanity. The Androscoggin River, or “Amascongan,” has been, in many ways, an important organ of nature that services the 3,400 square miles that make up the Androscoggin Basin. The river and its watershed region we see today was crafted over the course of millions of years and bears marks of the last ice age. For centuries, the Wabanaki relied on the river for agriculture, fishing, and transportation. As early as the 15th century, European explorers began surveying the mouth of the river. By the 18th century, Europeans began to settle the river, building new towns and spawning commercial fishing operations along it. The 19th and early 20th century brought about even more drastic changes for the river as larger infrastructures such as bridges, dams, and mills began to be constructed. Pollution soon plagued the river, forcing upon it a new identity. The Androscoggin River is an important artifact of our history and was of great significance to the Wabanaki people, European newcomers, and current citizens.

Long before the arrival of European newcomers, the Wabanaki lived alongside the Androscoggin River and used it resourcefully, yet respectfully. The Androscoggin swarmed with fish, including thousands of Atlantic Salmon, which today, is an endangered species. The river also produced rich soil along its intervals, generating conditions favorable for agriculture. In addition to its contributions feeding the Wabanaki people, the river and its tributaries were also massively used for transportation. During the winter months, the smooth ice on the river made for convenient foot transportation as opposed to the trails along the banks of the river. When ice was out, the river allowed for quick travel up and down the river valley by canoe. To the Wabanaki, the Androscoggin River was a foundation for various aspects of day-to-day life.

The late 18th, 19th century, and early 20th century brought the Androscoggin River into even more significance as the European newcomers also began to use to the river. The Androscoggin River became the source of energy to both small and large mills. The first of these mills was a sawmill built on the upper dam at Brunswick between 1753 and 1761. These mills generated a large economic boom in several towns and villages along the river. In particular, Lewiston between the years of 1850 and 1870 became an industrial powerhouse when “granite-sided canals, huge brick textile mills, and rows of brick and wooden workers’ housing were constructed just below the Great Falls” (Bethel Historical Society). Lewiston’s population spiked and economic prosperity brushed over the mill town. Soon enough, a plan to divert water from the Androscoggin through a series of canals was executed in Lewiston. Many other towns also experienced similar spikes in population and economic security. Lisbon Falls saw an economic boom in 1862, when a woolen mill was erected adjacent to the falls on the Androscoggin.

Unfortunately, the industrialization of the river had dire consequence. By the 1960s, “the Androscoggin River had become one of the most severely polluted rivers in the United States. Dissolved oxygen levels from Berlin, New Hampshire to Brunswick frequently reached zero during the summer, resulting in the death of nearly all fish and other aquatic life in the river” (Watts). A river that was, at one time, primarily used by the Wabanaki for fishing, agriculture, and transportation developed into an unrecognizable polluted disaster. This environmental atrocity helped to inspire national change when the the Clean Water Act passed in 1972. Crafted by Maine Senator Edmund Muskie who lived along the river in Rumford, the Clean Water Act

provided funding and legal mandates for sewage treatment plants along the Androscoggin River, as well as several other severely polluted rivers across the country.

Today, the Androscoggin River serves as a significant area of recreation. Thanks to the Clean Water Act, locals and tourists alike are able to enjoy the various types of recreation that the river has to offer. Fish populations have rebounded and the river is able to once again sustain life. However, not all is back to the way it was when the Wabanaki lived at peace with the river along its banks. Many sections of the river still have poor water quality, and infrastructures such as dams continue to deny Atlantic Salmon full access up the river. “The once enormous fish runs of the Androscoggin have disappeared from memory. Atlantic salmon have not been seen at Rumford Falls since the Indian People described them in the late 1600s” (Watts).

The Europeans and the Wabanaki had two notably different relationships with the river and nature in general. To fully understand the significance of the Androscoggin River for both the Wabanaki and the European newcomers, one must understand these two vastly different relationships and comprehend the core discrepancies between them. The Wabanaki believe in coexistence and respect for nature, as outlined in a Wabanaki creation myth that states, “Not only does Mother Earth bear the bones of our ancestors, it is her physical essence that gives us our bodies to live in. The essence of Mother Earth is in the physical body of the plants and animals, the fish and the birds and the water. When we eat and drink, we take the physical essence of Mother Earth into our bodies for our sustenance” (Wabanaki Creation Myth 1). Similarly to the Wabanaki, the European Christian creation story also sprouted roots for their relationship with nature. Genesis 1:26 states, “Then God said, ‘Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all

the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground”” (Bible). Unlike the Wabanaki, the Europeans believed in domination and exploitation of nature rather than coexistence. The European mindset threatened the Wabanaki way of life as well as the livelihood of the Androscoggin River.

The Androscoggin River played an influential role in our history and had a definite significance to the Wabanaki and European newcomers, and continues to play a significant role in the lives of citizens today. The Androscoggin River, was frequently used by the Wabanaki for transportation, agriculture, and fishing. Eventually, Europeans began to settle the river, building farmsteads, houses, small mills, churches, and eventually, bridges, as well as large mills that stimulated economic growth. This burst of industrialisation came with the undesirable consequence of hefty river pollution. The Androscoggin became one of the most polluted rivers in America, inspiring the creation of the Clean Water Act, which helped to clean rivers across the nation. Although progress is currently being made to improve environmental aspects of the river, traditional life for the Wabanaki will never be restored. The Wabanaki were displaced to the point of no return. Perhaps we are only beginning to recognize the importance of clean water and recreation on the river, something the natives clearly understood for countless centuries.

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