

Tear Down 'Deadbeat' Dams

Posted by Joan Russow

Friday, 09 May 2014 12:15 - Last Updated Monday, 12 May 2014 09:06

By YVON CHOUINARD 2014-05-07">



Credit: Marta Monteiro

VENTURA, Calif. — OF the more than 80,000 dams listed by the federal government, more than 26,000 pose high or significant safety hazards. Many no longer serve any real purpose. All have limited life spans. Only about 1,750 produce hydropower, according to the National Hydropower Association.

In many cases, the benefits that dams have historically provided — for water use, flood control and electricity — can now be met more effectively without continuing to choke entire watersheds.

Dams degrade water quality, block the movement of nutrients and sediment, destroy fish and wildlife habitats, damage coastal estuaries and in some cases rob surrounding forests of nitrogen. Reservoirs can also be significant sources of greenhouse gas emissions.

Put simply, many dams have high environmental costs that outweigh their value. Removing them is the only sensible answer. And taking them down can often make economic sense as

Tear Down 'Deadbeat' Dams

Posted by Joan Russow

Friday, 09 May 2014 12:15 - Last Updated Monday, 12 May 2014 09:06

well. The River Alliance of Wisconsin estimates that removing dams in that state is three to five times less expensive than repairing them.

The message has been slowly spreading around the country. More and more communities and states have reclaimed rivers lost to jackhammers and concrete. Last year, 51 dams in 18 states were taken down, restoring more than 500 miles of streams, according to the group American Rivers. Nearly 850 have been removed in the last 20 years, and nearly 1,150 since 1912.

But the work is far from done. I was disappointed to see the Energy Department release a report last week on the potential to develop new "sustainable" [hydroelectric](#) dams on rivers and streams across the country. The report follows President Obama's signing of two laws last year to encourage small hydro projects and revive nonproducing dams.

New dams are a bad idea. We've glorified them for decades, but our pride in building these engineering marvels has often blinded us to the environmental damage they cause. The consequences run the length of the river and beyond. Our many complex attempts to work around these obstacles would make Rube Goldberg proud. Interventions like fish elevators and trap-and-haul programs that truck fish around impoundments don't lead to true recovery for wild fish populations or reverse the other environmental problems caused by blocking a river's flow.

But we do know that removing dams brings streams and rivers back to life and replenishes our degraded aquifers.

case in point is the Elwha River on the Olympic Peninsula in Washington, where two hydroelectric dams built early in the last century exacted huge environmental costs but were no longer important as power generators. Salmon runs that once reached about 400,000 fish a year dropped to fewer than 3,000. A year after the Elwha Dam was removed, Chinook salmon returned to the river in numbers not seen in decades, with three-quarters of them observed spawning upstream of the former dam site. Today, the river runs free from its headwaters in Olympic National Park to the Strait of Juan de Fuca, and a terrible wrong imposed on the salmon-dependent Lower Elwha Klallam tribe has been righted.

President Obama should learn from that example. Most urgently, he should turn his attention

Tear Down 'Deadbeat' Dams

Posted by Joan Russow

Friday, 09 May 2014 12:15 - Last Updated Monday, 12 May 2014 09:06

to the Snake River in eastern Washington, where four dams along its lower reaches provide marginal (and replaceable) electricity generation that is outweighed by the opportunities for the revival of endangered salmon populations, plus the jobs and communities a healthy salmon fishery would support. Those deadbeat dams should be taken down and added to the list of dams in the process of being removed along the White Salmon River in Washington, the Penobscot in Maine and the Klamath in southern Oregon.

I've been working to take down dams for most of my life. The idea, once considered crazy, is gaining momentum. We should seize it and push for the removal of the many dams with high costs and low or zero value. The environmental impacts are too enormous.

Time and again, I've witnessed the celebration that comes with the removal of an unnecessary dam. After a river is restored and the fish have returned you never hear a single person say, "Gee, I wish we had our dam back."

Yvon Chouinard is the founder of Patagonia and executive producer of the new documentary "DamNation."

A version of this op-ed appears in print on May 8, 2014, on page A27 of the New York edition with the headline: Tear Down 'Deadbeat' Dams.

[Order Reprints](#)

| [Today's Paper](#)

| [Subscribe](#)