

Mohawks become first tribe to take down a federal dam

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In this Thursday, Nov. 17, 2016 photo, Tony David, water resources program manager for the St. Regis Mohawk Reservation, poses in front of a decommissioned hydroelectric powerhouse in Hogansburg, N.Y. A century after the first commercial dam was built on the St. Regis River, blocking the spawning runs of salmon and sturgeon, the river once central to the traditional culture of the Mohawk Tribe along New York's northern border is flowing freely again. (AP Photo/Mike Groll)

A century after the first commercial dam was built on the St. Regis River, blocking the spawning runs of salmon and sturgeon, the stream once central to the traditional culture of New York's Mohawk Tribe is flowing freely once again.

The removal of the 11-foot-high Hogansburg Dam this fall is the latest in the tribe's decades-long struggle to restore territory defiled by industrial pollution, beginning in the 1980s with PCBs and heavy metals from nearby General Motors, Alcoa and Reynolds Metal plants, a cleanup under federal oversight that's nearly complete.

The St. Regis River project is the first removal of an operating [hydroelectric dam](#) in New York state and the nation's first decommissioning of a federally licensed dam by a Native American tribe, federal officials say. Paired with the recent success of North Dakota's Standing Rock Sioux in rerouting a pipeline they feared could threaten their water supply, the dam's removal underscores longstanding concern over the health of tribal lands.

"We look at this not only as reclaiming the resources and our land, but also taking back this scar on our landscape that's a constant reminder of those days of exploitation," said Tony David, water resources manager for the St. Regis Mohawk Reservation, which the Mohawks call Akwesasne.



In this Thursday, Nov. 17, 2016, photo, brothers Angello Johnson, left, and Eric Sunday, apprentices in the St. Regis Mohawks' cultural restoration program, pose on a bank of the St. Regis River, in Hogansburg, N.Y. A century after the first commercial dam was built on the St. Regis River, blocking the spawning runs of salmon and sturgeon, the river once central to the traditional culture of the Mohawk Tribe along New York's northern border is flowing freely again. (AP Photo/Mike Groll)

The former industrial site will become a focal point in the Mohawks' cultural restoration program, funded by a \$19 million settlement in 2013 with GM, Alcoa and Reynolds for pollution of tribal fishing and hunting grounds along the St. Lawrence River. The program partners young apprentices with tribal elders to preserve the Mohawk language and pass on traditional practices such as hunting, fishing, trapping, basket-making, horticulture and medicine.

Standing on the rocky edge of a shallow, rushing river that was stilled by a 330-foot-long concrete dam until backhoes demolished it in September, David said a new park will be built to showcase Mohawk artwork where the powerhouse once hummed. On the opposite bank, a nature park will replace a treacherous tangle of industrial equipment, decrepit structures and trash.

"We're transforming it from a dangerous no-go zone to someplace that's inviting and beautiful," said Eric Sunday, an apprentice in the cultural restoration program. "It creates opportunities to get people together, showcase skills, get more knowledge about our traditional ways and just appreciate nature."



This Thursday, Nov. 17, 2016 photo, shows the decommissioned powerhouse to a hydroelectric dam on the St. Regis River in Hogansburg, N.Y. A century after the first commercial dam was built on the St. Regis River, blocking the spawning runs of salmon and sturgeon, the river once central to the traditional culture of

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(AP Photo/Mike Groll)

The dam, on former Mohawk land adjacent to the sprawling reservation, was in the early stages of federal relicensing five years ago when owner Brookfield Renewable Energy decided it wasn't economically feasible to make necessary upgrades. Seizing an opportunity to recover some treasured territory, the Mohawks became a co-licensee and took the lead in the decommissioning, working with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the state Department of Environmental Conservation and Trout Unlimited.

The dam removal re-established the river's connection with the St. Lawrence River and opened nearly 275 miles of stream habitat to migratory fish, including American eel, lake sturgeon, Atlantic salmon and walleye.

"The next town upstream was known by the Mohawks as 'Place of the Salmon,'" David said. "Before salmon were extirpated from this river, people would be out in the shallows netting or spearing them to feed their families."



In this Thursday, Nov. 17, 2016 photo, workers close water intakes on a decommissioned hydroelectric powerhouse on the St. Regis River in Hogansburg, N.Y. A century after the first commercial dam was built on the St. Regis River, blocking the spawning runs of salmon and sturgeon, the river once central to the traditional culture of the Mohawk Tribe along New York's northern border is flowing freely again. (AP Photo/Mike Groll)

The project is part of a larger movement that has dismantled almost 250 dams across the country since 2012, according to the conservation group American Rivers. Most have been small dams no longer useful, but environmental groups and Indian tribes in the Pacific Northwest are pressing for removal of large hydroelectric dams to restore salmon runs.

The Mohawk dam removal was not without controversy in the tribal

community. Will Clute, a Mohawk fishing guide, said he and some other fishermen worried spawning grounds downstream would be buried in sediment from behind the dam. When a dam was removed on the nearby Salmon River 10 years ago, some downstream habitat was buried under several feet of muck.

"We will be monitoring the impact on downstream habitat," David said. "What we've learned from all the dam removals across the country is that a lot of the negative impacts are short-term. The river will flush and fix itself. You need at least five to 10 years to see how it will end up."



This Thursday, Nov. 17, 2016 photo shows a disassembled turbine at a hydroelectric powerhouse in Hogansburg, N.Y. A century after the first commercial dam was built on the St. Regis River, blocking the spawning runs of salmon and sturgeon, the river once central to the traditional culture of the

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