

“Ask an eel.”  
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“Dammed Rivers”  
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We meant well. They were built with the best of intentions. Good paying work during depression times. Conowingo. Holtwood. Safe Harbor. York Haven. Each delivered electricity to rural counties. Each engineered irrigation. Each engineered commercial and residential growth. Each was a step into the modern era. But there always is a price to what we trust is progress. Change happens. Sometimes there is unintended collateral damage. Change isn't always progress. Progress requires intention. For every gain, something is lost.

Refrigerator and stove, blender and coffee maker -- all of these are terrific time-saving and labor-saving devices that require us working harder and longer so we can pay for all these time-saving and labor-saving devices. It applies equally to attempts at social engineering too. With the best of intentions. *“The best laid schemes o' mice an' men...”* There's always a price. What is the trade-off? Which, appropriately, is a pivotal question for oncologists to ask cancer patients: What are you willing to give up to have the best possible life given the limits of your life?

Shad don't swim this far anymore. Not like they once did. Shad no longer spawn upstream. Not like they once did. Not with the river flow slowed down, sediment mounding up against the concrete, water too warm, effluents discharged.

Count the man-made obstacles in the way, and shad, well, shad just don't jump as well as salmon. What if we didn't feel the need for waterskiing or lounging around with a beer in hand in a pontoon boat and installed those inflatable dams? Sure, they tried to offset the dilemma with ladders, bucket, hatcheries, even elevators. But it really hasn't worked. Damn dams. When last did some lucky angler on the river pulled one in? Shad is gone, this rich, tasty, large herring.

What was the last recorded shad run? When was the last time we watched them thick and churning in the river? When was the last time fat April shad, after our lean Pennsylvania winter, fed the hungry Susquehannock brave and his family, fed the soaring eagle swooping to the water, fed the swatting bear knee deep in river? Imagine the springtime festival they celebrated back then, the springtime relief. Life restored. Another chance. We survived! Now: time to be nourished enough for birth, for raising babies. Shad-time! Was the price of lost shad worth it?

If you think it's tough on shad swimming upstream to spawn, pity the poor American eel. Quick: what's the Sargasso Sea have to do with the Susquehanna Valley? Ask an eel. They squiggled and wiggled all their way from the Sargasso Sea and those warm Bermudian waters to wiggle and squiggle their way up the Chesapeake, then pressing on to wriggle and waggle against the current of the Susquehanna, wending and winding their way into freshwater where quivering elvers matured into slippery adult eels.

Shad swim from fresh to salt, eels from salt to fresh. Those Sargasso Sea spawned eels had more than the Susquehanna in instinct as a destination. They had in instinct the Octorara, Mahoning Creek, Fishing Creek, Juniata, Roaring Creek, Kipps Run. Shad want to swim the main arteries. Eels (them that avoid

getting snared by eel-weirs) swim for the capillaries, the tributaries, the creeks and streams that feed the Susquehanna.

Well, they did. In those creeks and streams they'd flourish. You skin them the way you pull off an orthopedic sock. Eel on the menu. Fried. Stewed. Jellied. Sautéed. Smoked. Eel Soup The problem is that eels, winding and slithering, are less capable than our friend the shad in vaulting a waterway steeplechase. But even if our eels wiggle pass the hydroelectric dams they bump right into the smaller dams on the tributaries, and these barriers don't offer a ladder, elevator, or collection basin.

What if we finally cleared the way to give the Susquehanna a good flushing? Our grandchildren might even enjoy some jellied eel. And it isn't just eels who struggle to get where instinct want them to go. No. Eels make excellent mussel taxis. Mussel larvae flag a ride upstream on the gills and take up residence when they decide "this shoal looks nice." Mussels are more than tasty when dipped in warm butter. Like all good mollusks they filter and cleanse the water. Lose the mussels and you lose clean water.

Lose the eels, Lose the mussels, lose the shad, you also end up pushing away the predators that relied on them. Each leads to each. You ever play pick-up-sticks?