

Down East

The Magazine of Maine

The Education of Brownie Carson

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In 1984, when Everett "Brownie" Carson was hired as executive director of the Natural Resources Council of Maine, he immediately began to galvanize its staff and its finances while organizing a complicated, exhausting campaign against the Big A dam on the West Branch of the Penobscot River. In the years since, he has led fights to raise water quality in Maine's rivers, improve forest practices in the North Woods, and tear down the Edwards Dam in Augusta. He has become Maine's leading voice against the airborne mercury pollution from Midwest power plants that is poisoning Maine's water and its people. Today Brownie Carson is an environmental leader of national stature. For these accomplishments and many others, the editors of DOWN EAST magazine are proud to name Brownie Carson as the recipient of the 2005 DOWN EAST Environmental Award.

LAST September Mike Leavitt, then chief administrator for the Environmental Protection Agency, made a much ballyhooed visit to Portland. He thought he was going to talk about cleaning up bus emissions. Instead, he found himself in a room with Brownie Carson, executive director of the Natural Resources Council of Maine, trying to explain how his agency could not only allow 1,100 Midwest coal-fired power plants to continue dumping mercury and other contaminants on Maine in violation of federal law, but could also support changes in the law that would allow the practice to continue for decades.

Carson wasn't alone in bracing Leavitt — representatives from the National Environmental Trust, the Maine Sierra Club, and Environment Maine also attended — but he brought with him more than a decade of experience in dealing with Maine's growing problem with mercury pollution. He came with enough credibility to persuade Maine's top two daily newspapers to greet Leavitt's arrival with editorials about mercury pollution. Carson also walked into the room with more than 8,000 members of the Natural Resources Council of Maine (NRCM) behind him and a level of personal determination that friends say hasn't softened since he took the job in 1984.

"The issues that really push my personal buttons are pollution and the fouling of our land and water and the risk it poses to life," Carson explains. "When we've got warnings for eating fish

because they're contaminated with mercury, when more than four out of ten women of childbearing age in Maine have levels of mercury in their bodies that exceed safe limits, there is something fundamentally wrong with the way we are treating our world and the state of Maine."

And mercury is only one of the issues that Carson has piled onto the Natural Resources Council's plate. There's the Penobscot River Project, where NRCM is leading a coalition of organizations determined to remove two dams and open up 500 miles of the Penobscot River to sea-run salmon and other species. The council is out front in the campaign to persuade the state of Maine to adopt a comprehensive energy policy by encouraging more alternative energy projects and tackling global warming. Landowners salivating at the development potential of the North Woods are having heart attacks over Carson's proposal for a moratorium on major projects until the state's Land Use Regulation Commission has hired enough new staffers to review huge proposals properly.

The council's ongoing campaign to clean up the Androscoggin River, still the most polluted waterway in Maine, led it to create an entirely new organization, Maine Rivers, as well as to lobby for legislation to require paper mills on the river to install more sophisticated anti-pollution equipment. And it is the only environmental organization in the state that watchdogs both the State House and environmental regulatory agencies on a full-time basis.

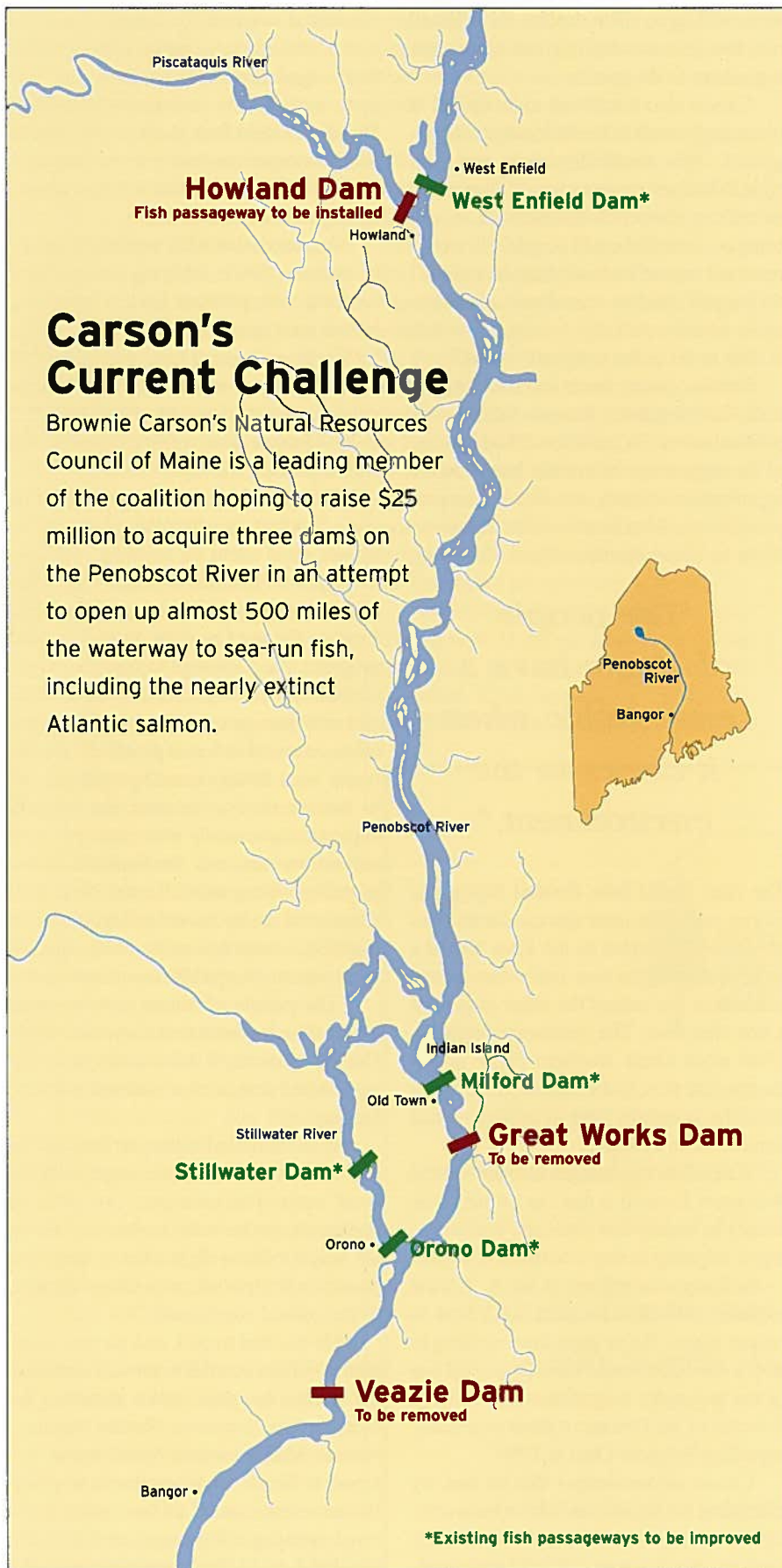


Since his formative years as a callow lawyer in the '80s (upper left), Carson has collaborated on a wide range of environmental campaigns with such luminaries as Governor John McKernon (upper right), Governor Angus King (lower right) and Senator Susan Collins (center).

AP PHOTO/CARL D. WALSH

Carson's Current Challenge

Brownie Carson's Natural Resources Council of Maine is a leading member of the coalition hoping to raise \$25 million to acquire three dams on the Penobscot River in an attempt to open up almost 500 miles of the waterway to sea-run fish, including the nearly extinct Atlantic salmon.



Currently there's a bitter debate running through national environmental circles around the notion that environmentalism is dead. Carson ticks off all the items on his agenda and laughs at the idea. "Dead? We're barely getting started," he says.

CARSON says "we" a lot, in all the usual places other people would say "I" when talking about their work or their organization. Now fifty-seven, Everett "Brownie" Carson — he gets the nickname from his middle name, Brown — is tall, two inches over six feet, and rangy in the way of someone who runs several miles every day, as he does. Married and the father of sixteen-year-old twin daughters, Carson drives a Honda Civic hybrid, partial penance perhaps for his funky extravagance, a 1955 Lincoln Capri convertible, "*convertible* being the operative word," Carson quips. He bought the car in Seattle in October 1968, two days before he left for Vietnam as a Marine platoon commander.

Carson is a native of Virginia who first came to Maine in the early 1960s as a vacationing teenager. Over the course of several summers he, his two older brothers, and his father canoed the Penobscot River and several Down East lakes and rivers and sailed the coast. (He still sails, although he says that wife Dana Porter Carson serves as captain.)

"I decided after that experience that I wanted to live in Maine," he explains. "So I went out of my way to go to the best college in the state, Bowdoin College in Brunswick."

Halfway through college, though, Carson decided he needed some time away from academia, and in 1967 he enlisted in the U.S. Marine Corps. He served five months in Vietnam and Laos before being wounded and shipped home and back to civilian life.

"That experience in Vietnam, being wounded, it really changed my perspective about accepting anything at face value," he offers. "Like dumping waste into the rivers — just because everyone did it, that didn't make it right."

Back at Bowdoin College, he became an antiwar activist and began to take an interest in the incipient environmental movement. While still a senior in 1972, he

ran for Congress in the Maine Democratic primary on a bold platform that included cleaning up the environment immediately — and lost going away. Law school at the University of Maine and a stint with Pine Tree Legal Assistance followed before he joined the Natural Resources Council in December 1983 as a staff attorney and lobbyist. Only a few months later, he was named executive director.

For a professional advocate, a person who makes his living trying to persuade others, Carson is surprisingly soft-spoken. He raises his voice to a normal conversational level only when he wants to make a point. It's a voice that makes people lean forward and pay attention, a good trick for someone who frequently speaks before legislative committees and political gatherings.

With Carson, though, the voice is just who he is, along with a ready smile and easy manner that belie his genuine zeal for protecting Maine's environment. "He's got a real fire in the belly," declares Clinton "Bill" Townsend, Skowhegan attorney and a legendary NRCM member who helped found the organization and served on its board for forty-two years. Townsend was on the committee that originally hired Carson. "He had it when we hired him, and he still has it today. When you listen to him talk about issues like clean air and free-running rivers, he is as articulate and committed now as he was twenty years ago."

THE Natural Resources Council in 1984 was an organization that had stumbled a little bit since the loss of its popular director Rob Gardiner, who had left a year earlier to run Maine's public broadcasting system. Carson took an organization that had morale and money problems and immediately began to galvanize both its donor base and its staff.

"That was one of Brownie's big surprises," Townsend explains. "He has to be one of the leading fund-raisers in North America by my standards. He knows the issues and gets along great with people."

"One of the concerns the board always had was making ends meet," recalls Mark Ishkanian, then the council's director of communications and now an independent consultant. "At the time Brownie took over, a fair amount of our support depended on benefactor members, individuals who

were willing to write checks. As it turned out, Brownie was really good at persuading others to do that."

Carson also turned out to be skilled at managing a staff of creative, idealistic go-getters. "His leadership style was just right," Ishkanian explains. "There was something about him that brought — still brings — out the best in people. He would never ask anyone to do anything he wouldn't do himself. And he was always careful to make sure the staff didn't burn out, which is easy to do in the nonprofit world."

Besides raising funds and directing the staff, Carson quickly found a focus for his political savvy. He had also walked into one of the biggest environmental battles in the organization's history, the Big A dam proposed for the West Branch of the Penobscot River by Great Northern Paper Company.

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The dam would have flooded Ripogenus Gorge, one of the most spectacular sections of whitewater rapids in the East, turned a large section of the river into a dam-bound deadwater, and ruined the water quality of a first-class river. The controversy ended in 1989 when Great Northern Paper finally dropped the plan, and it marked a high-water point for a certain type of environmental confrontation in Maine.

"One of the big changes with the Natural Resources Council is that our primary role twenty or twenty-five years ago was lobbying or litigating to stop a destructive project — the Eastport oil refinery or Big A," Carson explains. "We do a lot more work now to restore places. We've gone from working to stop a dam that would have destroyed one of the last really magnificent free-running stretches of the Penobscot River to actually removing Edwards Dam in 1999."

Carson acknowledges that he and, by extension, his organization have been criticized over the years for being too politically cautious. Some voices within Maine's envi-

ronmental community quietly comment that Carson occasionally avoids taking hard-edged stands on controversial subjects, such as the near-incendiary North Woods National Park proposal, and that he declines to get involved in issues that don't have a statewide profile. Carson doesn't apologize for either position.

"A great deal of what we do is political," he explains. "We're lobbying for legislation, working with political leaders, appearing before state agencies." His 1972 campaign for Congress may not have won him public office, "but it was my introduction to Maine politics, and this job, among many other tasks, requires a lot of engagement with Maine politics," he says.

Carson has never run for political office since that first quixotic attempt, but he has shown a real talent for building coalitions in support of a number of statewide referendum campaigns on issues as diverse as funding for the Land for Maine's Future program, the campaign to stop the expansion of the Maine Turnpike to three lanes, and measures to control clear cutting and other destructive forest practices. He has rarely been disappointed by taking issues to the voters. For instance, the turnpike expansion eventually won passage on its second attempt, but the Sensible Transportation Act passed in the first vote remains on the books and still requires new highway construction to meet specific requirements for public input and need.

"The people of Maine have a certain ethic when it comes to the environment," Carson explains. "I don't think you could get elected dogcatcher without acknowledging it."

He has admitted in the past that NRCM can't take on every battle, especially the local ones. For example, last year he declined to get his outfit embroiled in a bitter neighborhood fight over a new boat launch in Brunswick, even though he lives in the coastal community.

"He has had to pick and choose which battles to fight in order to prevent spreading the council too thin and/or alienating the membership," observes Phyllis Austin, a veteran Maine environmental writer and reporter. "Some might say that in so doing, Brownie has created an institution interested more in playing things safe than in taking bold or radical positions that are

needed for the sake of spirited debate and environmental progress. But such is a trade-off, and the end result is that the Natural Resources Council is a responsible agent of environmental change."

Austin also credits Carson with keeping the organization focused on its roots in wilderness preservation. The council started back in 1959 as an advocate for creating the Allagash Wilderness Waterway and protecting Baxter State Park. Today, Austin points out, the council under Carson is "the sole long-term environmental watchdog following the Land Use Regulation Commission," which oversees planning and zoning for the state's 10.5-million-acre unorganized territory. "It's a fundamental way the public benefits from NRCM, because the council represents the greater public interest in protecting the North Woods."

MOST recently that interest has been focused on the newly released plans by Plum Creek Timber Company for a thirty-year development and conservation project encompassing 465,000 acres in the Moosehead Lake region [DOWN EAST, March]. The firm wants to carve out 800 to 1,200 camp lots on 6,000 acres on about ten ponds and lakes, with another 6,000 acres set aside in two plots on Moosehead and nearby Brassua Lake for resort developments. It is far and away the largest development ever proposed for Maine's North Woods, and even LURC admits it doesn't currently have the capacity or the expertise to handle the application.

"The size and complexity of Plum Creek's proposal is such a huge challenge," Carson says, shaking his head, "particularly when you have a LURC that has been downsized and stripped of planners to the point where the state does not have the ability to effectively review the project. It raises the question of whether we should have a moratorium on large-scale developments until we have looked at the state's ability to cope with them."

Carson anticipates Plum Creek — and the developments that will inevitably follow — will take up a substantial portion of his and his staff's attention in a future when many other vital, highly complex issues are clamoring for their attention. "The work on global warming that NRCM and some other organizations are pioneering is hugely important," he notes. "We have to work to restore

funding for the Land for Maine's Future program. There are still too many people in the legislature and outside it who ask only what the costs of environmental regulation are, and don't ask about the benefits."

And then there's the Penobscot Project. "Talk about a challenge," Carson sighs. The council is a leading member of a coalition that ranges from the U.S. Department of the Interior to the Atlantic Salmon Federation to the Penobscot Indian Nation. They are working with PPL Corporation, an electric generation company, to acquire three dams on the Penobscot — at Veazie, Old Town, and Howland. The first two will be removed and improved fish passageways will be installed at the third, a \$25-million project that will open up almost 500 miles of the river to eleven species of sea-run fish, including the nearly extinct native Atlantic salmon, that have not been seen in the upper reaches of the Penobscot for more than a century.

"It's Edwards Dam times three, at least," Carson says. In the six years since the historic dam in Augusta came down, the Kennebec River between the Capital City and Waterville has rebounded far beyond

even the most optimistic projections [DOWN EAST, September 2004]. "There were seals in Waterville last summer," Carson says with a touch of wonder. "Millions of alewives. Salmon are building nests in the river all the way up to Halifax Dam."

As he gets closer to sixty, Carson faces inevitable questions about his own future. He insists he has no plans to retire to run for public office or take a larger role at the national level. But he also points out that NRCM has a new generation of activists, both on the staff and on the board of directors, ready to step up to the plate.

Carson could have moved on years ago, Bill Townsend observes. "He has quite a profile outside Maine," he notes. "He's on the national board of the League of Conservation Voters, and you don't get put on that for nothing. But I think he really enjoys the work he's doing here. He's found a niche he feels comfortable with."

Carson shrugs at the idea of leaving his post or Maine anytime soon. "There's still a lot to be done." □



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