

Big 'n fishy issues rising to surface: Do our government leaders have a plan?

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Minnesota fishing records and near-records make headlines. That beat goes on, especially with the DNR's recent addition to Minnesota's record-fish program — catch and-release length records for muskies, lake sturgeon, and flathead catfish.

Fishing history includes centuries of angler obsession with big fish. But consider other fishy record-breaking matters, legal and political, now looming big over Minnesota's fishing scene. How will they play out?

Recall last summer's illegal gill-netting on Gull Lake and the illegal wild rice harvests on nearby Hole-in-the-Day Lake, in Crow Wing County north of Brainerd. These were intentional violations of state law planned by tribal leaders and their attorneys. Their ultimate aim: ascend the court ladder and win off-reservation fishing, hunting, and gathering rights, plus tribal co-management of natural resources, across the vast 1855 Treaty ceded territory.

That's a big patch of Minnesota, stretching from Lake Mille Lacs northward through the Aitkin and Brainerd lakes regions; the Grand Rapids, Park Rapids, Detroit Lakes, and Bemidji areas; and more touching the Canadian and Dakota borders in places.

The court cases involving two netters and two ricers from four Chippewa bands last spring. Along the way, a judge recused himself. And the Crow Wing County Attorney's Office has delayed this new "treaty rights" case until Nov. 8.

Big stuff! The 1855 territory is larger than the 12-county 1837 Minnesota ceded territory where Chippewa harvest rights, co-management, and impacts on state citizens have played out in horrendous and costly fashion, with no end in sight. Like 1837, the 1855 area includes umpteen lakes and stream miles, public accesses, and state parks, with huge implications for the DNR's state, regional, and area fisheries and wildlife offices. Do state officials have legal and political response plans to protect the interests of Minnesota's government and citizens. Are certain parties secretly plotting a possible unsettling settlement proposal? How might citizen fishing and hunting rights, plus the reach of state government resource-management authority, be impacted?

Mille Lacs fiasco grows

A Minnesota record-breaker: the ongoing Mille Lacs state-tribal co-management debacle, the biggest mess in the history of Minnesota fishing, fisheries management, and fishing-related tourism. Thank the ever-evolving "management" acrobatics—unnecessarily super-low quotas ("safe allowable harvests"), tight slots, low limits,

last year's four-month walleye-angling shutdown, political stocking, and this season's no walleye-keeping, night-fishing ban, hooking-mortality assessments and studies, and the always-lurking shutdown specter.

Much of this "management" would never happen outside the Mille Lacs-unique treaty management system, which no treaty envisioned. It seems like every wiggle of every needle triggers more headlines, new regs, and more studies. Naturally, this spawns widespread misperceptions about Mille Lacs.

Well, when there's a leadership void, what fills the hole? Angler-biologists with their versions of "common sense," or nonsense. Zillions of people wrongly believing the walleye population is disappearing and in crisis. Hordes of Minnesotans accusing the DNR of mismanagement (as though everything in a complex ecosystem can be managed). Much distrust of DNR data—creel surveys, hooking mortality guesstimates, fall assessment netting, and more.

This distrust is unfortunate, since many decades of Mille Lacs fisheries assessment data exemplify topnotch fisheries science. What's problematic now is how the data is used under extremist treaty management. And how can a state agency, especially the DNR, function when so many stakeholders despise and distrust it? Why do Minnesota government top dogs defend a flawed system instead of fighting it?

The Mille Lacs walleye-fishing army has shrunk to record lows the past two years, despite normal (and often spectacular) walleye catching. The fishing-related economy is badly harmed. Uncertainty dominates. Being future-oriented and optimistic is often impossible. Generations of Mille Lacs-connected folk—lake home owners and cabin families, resort patrons, and thousands of anglers with long Mille Lacs ties—are trapped under this never-lifting black cloud.

Any walleye-fishing shutdown this season, on top of everything else, would likely trigger widespread outrage. Mindful of that, and given Gov. Dayton's no-shutdown command, DNR Fisheries managers opted against shutdown despite July numbers pushing anglers over the state's walleye quota. Earlier, citizen-members of the Mille Lacs Fisheries Advisory Committee voiced strong opposition to any shutdown tied to fuzzy hooking-mortality data. Note that Don Pereira, DNR Fisheries chief, emphasized that the quota overage through July was biologically insignificant.

Expect more headlines and hassles in coming weeks as August creel survey and walleye-kill numbers add to the quota overage.

And then there's Mille Lacs Band Chairwoman Melanie Benjamin's dramatic announcement last week that attorneys for the Mille Lacs Band and for the other seven Chippewa bands with harvest and management rights at Mille Lacs are exploring a possible lawsuit against the state for allowing catch-and-release walleye fishing after hitting the quota.

Gary Clancy, storyteller

After the passing of Gary Clancy last month, his long-time readers and fellow outdoor writers offered fitting tributes.

Columnists Tony Peterson and Shawn Perich touched my Clancy thoughts by telling how Gary got beyond &c mere mechanics of fishing and hunting. Gary's down-to-earth style showcased the personal experience happenings that anglers and hunters enjoy.

When Gary Clancy entered outdoor journalism in the 1970s and 1980s, the how-to revolution was coming on big-time. Outdoor editors often cautioned writers to avoid the "me and Joe" stories and to get with the new age of marketing fishing secrets, hot tips, and the right products. Thankfully, Gary kept a nice balance.

Sure, his accounts of pursuing fish, fowl, and critters naturally included tactical stuff.

But, refreshingly, he wove into his columns the human dimension, those anecdotes that flavor our outdoor sports.

A reader might react to a Clancy tale with, "Hey, that happened to me too!" Or "Yikes, that was a dumb move!" Or "Ha! That's a funny one!"

Gary was neither a self-obsessed angling jock or a know-it-all hunter on parade: His stories captured the broad and rich nature of our outdoor sports.