

## Haven't we learned our lesson yet?

### Ron's Ramblings By Ron Schara

To paraphrase Carroll Bryant, everything in life (including the walleye management on Lake Mile Lacs,) has a purpose—even if it's to serve as a bad example. Some recent bad examples:

In Minnesota today, we have a premier walleye lake with a population at a 40-year low thanks to the DNR's miscalculated "safe harvest" figures.

Nobody in DNR Fisheries has been fired, or even transferred as a result.

Nobody in the Legislature speaks up to send state aid to Mile Lacs businesses that are suffering the economic pain as the walleye limit at Mile Lacs sinks to one. One is a lonely number.

OK, enough beating a horse that's already dead.

Have we learned anything from the Mule Lacs experience? A few thoughts:

Although it was slow incoming, DNR Fisheries officials finally admitted their excessive harvest quotas aimed at 15- to 18-inch walleyes was a huge error that set the stage for the situation in which we now find ourselves. Now, making Mille Lacs healthy again will be painful for all concerned.

We also have learned that it wasn't tribal netting, by itself that decimated the walleyes in Lake Mile Lacs. The Mile Lacs band and other tribes with treaty fishing rights had nothing to gain by hurting the lake or its sport anglers.

Recently, the Fond du Lac Band of Chippewa—at the request of the Bois Forte Band—agreed to drop its plans to net and spear walleyes in Lake Vermilion this spring, although the band had all of the treaty rights to do so.

The Bois Forte tribal chair, Kevin Leec said the request was made "because of significant concerns." One of those concerns, he said, was to keep Vermilion known for its tourism opportunities, not tribal netting.

A Vermilion resort owner was quoted as saying the Bois Forte band is considered to be "good neighbors." Maybe that's also the good news: The goodwill of the Lake Vermilion community—

its tourism business and all—is considered too important to risk for a few walleye dinners.

Is there another lesson here?

The treaty rights of Native Americans to fish, hunt, and gather have been sustained by the nation's highest courts. They are not the issue. The issue is gill nets. It doesn't matter who sets them.

Gill nets are a slippery slope. They are difficult to manage and almost impossible to control.

The Red Lake Band learned that lesson a few years ago when walleyes all but disappeared in Upper and Lower Red lakes, largely because of unregulated and illegal netting. Ask state fish managers from Maine to Alaska and they'll share similar stories of over-fishing with nets or traps.

Minnesotans have seen it before. Our state history shows that the business of netting walleyes and the sport of angling walleyes are unequal pursuits. The former threatens the quality or existence of the latter. It's happened on Lake of the Woods and Rainy Lake. Years of commercial netting made both lakes famous for their high populations of banana-sized walleyes.

Today all of those lakes—Upper and Lower Red, Lake of the Woods, and Rainy Lake—have returned to walleye glory, aided by state and tribal leadership. But the comeback of world-class walleye fishing did not occur until the walleye nets were eliminated or severely controlled.

The key word is controlled. It's not easy to do. Walleyes are like gold, and gill nets can easily catch most nuggets. As a former federal wildlife agent once told me, "Asking a commercial salmon fisherman to take only his quota is like asking him to reach into ajar of gold bars when no one is around but take only one."

Speaking of one, if Gov. Dayton has a tough opener on Lake Vermilion, he could stop at Mile Lacs on his way back to St Paul. Guided on Mile Lacs, there's a good chance the governor could catch one walleye.

The next day's headlines will say it all: "Dayton catches walleye limit on opening day."