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## **Treaty management on Mille Lacs**

### ***Time for long overdue change***

By Tim Ajax, Fishing guide, Isle

The obvious headline: the Lake Mille Lacs fish population has been out of balance for years. DNR knows their treaty management has played a role. Unfair fish allocations, spawning-time gillnetting, strict quotas and angling regulations, plus related bad publicity are too much. Let's have change, no more excuses.

Those in charge need to fix this big problem. Stop the netting during the spawn. Unlock the handcuffs of big money political management! Start caring about the lake, the economy, the people, and the walleyes.

Miles of gill nets on the spawning grounds have an impact. DNR, treaty management, and GLIFWC cannot continually tell us that the running of big boats, motors, and thousands of feet of gill nets over spawning grounds for days does not disrupt the maximizing of the spawning reproduction process. Please, let walleyes do their thing. The bands catch mainly male walleyes, especially under 18-19 inches, the same fish DNR now says are in short supply. Under DNR's treaty management, anglers have targeted the same fish. And if DNR worries about a giant eating machine they helped create, why keep anglers from harvesting the buildup of male walleyes over 20 inches? They affect the food chain.

Why the hooking-mortality assessment? That unfair poundage penalty hurts anglers and fish. It pushes us closer to the safe allowable harvest and whatever that might bring. Where else does DNR enforce a penalty on anglers for releasing fish other than Mille Lacs? Do they really know pounds released, let alone pounds that died?

For years before tribal gill-netting and DNR's treaty management, anglers could keep six walleyes, with one over 20 inches. The harvest was spread over more walleye sizes. The result: more balance and a lake in far better shape.

DNR and tribal managers have doubled the pike quotas in one year, making it look like pike are everywhere and eating everything. Be honest! Anglers and resorters know there's no pike explosion. Managers now encourage more pike harvest so the bands won't worry about exceeding their pike quotas and stopping walleye netting. DNR wants to look like they're doing something good.

And let state and tribal managers get transparent! From the start, we've been told the bands' gillnetted fish are closely counted. Are they? Who's watching? We see landings where there is no counting. Remember last spring's late ice-out? We were told netting walleyes after May 15 was illegal for the bands, excluding the Mille Lacs Band. Last spring, after May 15, miles of non-Mille Lacs Band nets were set from Garrison Bay to Knox Point on the north shore. I and others saw no Minnesota DNR officers the entire time. Occasionally we saw a tribal pickup with federal license plates parked at the

Garrison access.

We called DNR with concerns about illegal netting after May 15. A DNR official said a certain band was netting perch and getting few fish. Well, our own fishing showed walleyes stacked along the north shore breaklines for days.

And here's another double standard. DNR stops angler boats for invasive species checks, while tribal netters arrive and leave the landings with zebra mussels (and what else?) on boats, nets, and other equipment and goes to and from God knows what other lakes. Where's Enforcement?

Livelihoods depend on this great lake. Struggling resorts and many other businesses are threatened. Anglers, families, and thousands of caring people feel hurt. Too often, launches spend more time tied to docks than making fun trips on Mille Lacs. The entire Mille Lacs community, including the 12-year-old bait boy on a launch, needs resolution.

The state's unacceptable Mille Lacs management and failure to work for us brings negative, far-reaching effects. Like the Isle School District's loss of nearly 100 students in the past five years. Families move away because of fewer jobs. Management decisions and policies affect the Mille Lacs community's economic vitality and overall well-being. Their paychecks come from taxpayers, so DNR and state leaders need to make things right! Please take the burden off our community.

It's time for sportsmen statewide, and those from around the country who care about Mille Lacs and other Minnesota fishing waters, to unite, rally, and support our precious resources. Share your voices! The current state of the Mille Lacs fishery and struggling surrounding communities are proof that we must act now and be heard. Communicate promptly and often with your state and federal government officials, and with candidates for office.

Our neighbors in Wisconsin recently saw limits in 200 lakes decrease to one walleye, thanks to tribal netting, spearing, and the political monster called treaty management. Do you want these severe restrictions everywhere in Minnesota's ceded territories? Just one walleye in a tight slot? Or catch-and-release only? Wisconsin bands gillnet and spear on Mille Lacs during the spawn and we're almost there! Surely it's time we all buy a state angling license, a fishing pole, bait, and just have fun catching fish together. This sounds simple, but we all know it is the best solution.

DNR officials say their hands are cuffed by treaty management restraints. Well, let the higher powers produce the keys, unlock the handcuffs, cut through the money-powered political barriers, and remove all roadblocks. No more politics. No more excuses. No more gill nets during the spawn. It is time to save the Mille Lacs fishery – the fish and the people.