

# Treaty management spawns false Mille Lacs collapse message

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Outdoor News

January 22, 2016

Lake Mille Lacs took center stage at last week's-annual DNR Roundtable, with hundreds of conservationists, outdoor stakeholders, journalists, legislators, and high state officials present. That's Mille Lacs, Minnesota's ongoing outdoor Crisis of the Century.

Mille Lacs holds many fish-related records. Through decades of fisheries science worldwide—in investigative reports and scientific journals, and at gatherings of prominent fisheries-biology professionals—Mille Lacs has been routinely billed as the ultimate classic natural walleye lake. Historically, and until recent years, Mille Lacs was the most popular fishing destination for Minnesota anglers in all seasons, with the highest boat and fish-house counts, the most angler-hours spent on any Minnesota lake, and the largest annual tallies of angler-caught walleyes.

Now, Mille Lacs owns a new fishy record it doesn't need: the most-published negative vocabulary ever associated with a Minnesota sport fishery. Thank the extremist workings of treaty fisheries management (OK, state and tribal co-management) and the related perceptions and misperceptions they generate.

The Mille Lacs walleye-fishing community includes many thousands of people: generations of cabin- and lakeshore-owning families and friends; resort owners and patrons; launch operators, guides, and their customers; thousands of angler-boaters from across Minnesota and beyond; plus those in diverse businesses who benefit from the angling crowd.

Now this huge fishing family is terrorized and victimized by the biggest PR disaster in the histories of Minnesota fishing, fisheries management, and fishing-related tourism. Thank the legal and political tangle called treaty fisheries management, and the callous indifference of state and tribal government personnel. Mention Mille Lacs in almost any setting and people are quick with their informed and uninformed takes about “that mess” Annually for the last .15 years, the state-tribal co-management escapade has brought a negative Mille Lacs media cycle that would cost many millions to buy. Last year's unprecedented, unnecessary, and unjustified Aug 3 to Dec 1 closure of Mille Lacs to walleye sport-fishing swelled this ongoing tidal wave of collapse and crisis stories.

From small-town and metro Minnesota papers to the *New York Times*, and worldwide via websites and social media, the false Mille Lacs narrative is that the walleyes are about gone. Hey, fisheries scientists affirm that Mille Lacs walleyes are not in biological crash mode. Until three years ago, despite the messy and misleading fish politics, resorts stayed pretty busy and public-access parking lots were often full, even during the week. Anglers chased walleyes amidst traditional hot and moderate bite swings. Since then, the political treaty-management quotas were chopped by over 90 percent. And anglers have faced one-walleye limits, super-tight slots, and the never-ending "collapse" theme. Many locals estimate an 80 or 90 percent drop in boats on the lake: But the walleye population, with many year-classes present (along with the gigantic young 2013 year-

class), is not down 90 percent and remains fishable.

### **What a vocabulary!**

Sadly, the extended Mule Lacs family lives under a giant black cloud that never lifts. Seems every week brings more news and additions to the Mille Lacs-related vocabulary. Like walleye downturn. Walleye loss. Walleye shortage. Walleye troubles. And a walleye population that's ailing, failing, faltering, shrinking, and struggling. It's plagued, plummeted, plunged, and a problem. Pile on those scary D words, like demise, declined, diminished, dropped, dwindled, and disappeared; and those strong C words in headlines, articles, and opinion pieces about Mule Lacs—like collapse, crash, and crisis. Add fancy alliteration, like Mille Lacs malady, and walleye woes. And those attention-grabbing low terms—30-year low, 40-year low (which is it?), and record low. And everything's challenging, complex, and complicated. Last August, the Mille Lacs walleye sport fishery was shut down, closed, and shuttered! A front-page *Star Tribune* story highlighted a dearth of walleyes, like they're all gone. And a *Brainerd Dispatch* headline heralded the Mille Lacs walleye apocalypse!

As this winter's late ice-up illustrates, fishing-related businesses face whatever a sometimes-tough Mother Nature gives 'em. And they deal with an ever-evolving sport-fishing economy. Surely it's wrong to hit them with monstrous losses forced by extremist Mille Lacs unique "treaty management" and its intolerable PR crap storms. And it's unfair to the forward-thinking Mille Lacs old-timers who helped pioneer and spread good things, from walleye catch-and-release ethics and lake-specific regs to Keep the Lake Clean campaigns; from modernizing DNR

Enforcement's structure and urging annual Fisheries survey work on the large lakes to forming good bonds and info exchanges between the lake community and DNR Fisheries personnel.

### **'Transparency' progress?**

This writer has long monitored media behavior on tribal-related issues. Too often journalists and politicians wrongly link due scrutiny and discussion of tribal-government policies and tribal resource-management practices to anti-Indian racism. Also, influential journalists routinely attach "the Chippewa" label to 21st century tribal policymakers, lawyers, and resource managers—a powerful taxpayer-funded political and legal force. The misplayed race card stifles information flow and thwarts open debate, allowing high-impact players to escape accountability for their policies and actions

Some powerful voices have joined state Rep. Sondra Erickson, R-Princeton, and other critics of the closed-door Technical Committee meetings between Minnesota DNR officials and personnel from eight Ojibwe bands (six from Wisconsin) and their umbrella group, the Great Lakes Indian Fish & Wildlife Commission. At these important sessions, state and tribal officials make decisions impacting management and resource harvests at Mille Lacs and across the vast 1837 Treaty ceded territory covering a dozen counties of east central Minnesota. In late July, as the walleye-fishing shutdown loomed, even the *Star Tribune* Editorial Board warned how secret meetings "fuel distrust." Simultaneously, the paper's outdoor writer, Dennis Anderson, urged that the governor and key legislators instruct DNR that its meetings with the Chippewa can no longer be held in secret," so the public knows "the

nature, context, and agreed-upon definitions of data being used to make management decisions.”

More recently, in *Outdoor News*, Ron Schara highlighted how secret decision-making at the state tribal Technical Committee meetings dodges the public's right to know. Regarding co-management of Mille Lacs, Schara noted that "DNR and tribal fish managers regularly hold closed meetings regarding the people's walleyes.... Without transparency, the public (all Minnesotans, including tribal members) is in the dark about how fish management decisions are made."

Schara recalled how DNR officials last fall stated they'd bring along a couple members of the new Mille Lacs Fishery Advisory Council to listen in on fish-management negotiations at this month's (Jan. 20-21) Technical Committee meeting. But the DNR soon stated that couldn't happen because tribal officials opposed it. After the Jan. 11 MLFAC meeting at Mille Lacs, I asked a DNR official (off the record) what would happen if DNR Fisheries Chief Don Pereira took two or three people of his choosing into the Technical Committee meeting. Would GLIFWC personnel have armed guards at the door? His answer Well, probably not But they might walk out of the meeting! My reply "Hey, that would be the headliner! Test 'em! Or maybe Minnesota DNR personnel should walk out!"

### **Some bottom lines**

The list of negatives brought on by treaty fisheries management at Mille Lacs is long

and heavy. Think major economic impacts on business and property owners. Widespread scorn towards policymakers in state government. Making Mille Lacs the controversy capitol of Minnesota fishing. Dooming many people to uncertain futures. A gloomy public mood. Culturally offensive gill netting of game fish (especially when they're concentrated and vulnerable at spawning time). Unfair fish allocations. The gigantic collapse-crash-crisis PR disaster. Extremist DNR management actions that would never happen outside treaty management. And the replacement of Mille Lacs traditional popularity with Mille Lacs avoidance.

(Regarding the spawning-time tribal gill netting, it was never ordered by any old treaty or modern court. How treaty rights play out, including harvest methods, are decided politically by tribal managers. They cloak everything in culture and tradition. Traditional "Ojibwe culture" at Mille Lacs cared about other people, while today's unaccountable tribal governments and their corporate-legal-political machines are more self-interested and uncaring.)

Always remember that old ethics principle. When the negative impacts and bad costs of public policy far outweigh any positives, that policy is seriously flawed and unethical. Those in state and tribal governments who drive and defend the Mille Lacs madness should be held accountable to the max. And don't forget—on Mille Lacs, walleyes might come snooping under your holes! Bobbers still sink and rods still bend!