

Endless storm batters Mille Lacs sport fishery

Joe Fellego, in *Rocking the Boat* Outdoor News, November 4, 2016

Labels for the inexcusable Lake Mille Lacs state-tribal co-management mess include controversy, debacle, disaster, fiasco, tragedy, and a never-lifting heavy black cloud. Add "misguided," prominent in former DNR commissioner Gene Merriam's vocabulary. Some folks call it a hurricane-force crap storm.

Indeed, the destructive gale rips at the sportfishing community, with no end in sight.

No court, let alone an 1837 treaty, ordered the 21st century political management making Mille Lacs the controversy capital of Minnesota fishing. On *Outdoor News* radio recently, managing editor Rob Drieslein referred to the "frustrating" Mille Lacs mess and opined that "the whole thing is ridiculous."

Mille Lacs anglers and resorters faced a 2016 open-water season with a super-low walleye quota, no keeping, plus a night-fishing ban. Predictably, walleye angler numbers and hours on the lake fell to all-time lows. Maximum conservation, eh? But, under the Mille Lacs unique treaty management system, that big sacrifice wasn't enough. So, clobber anglers and suffering businesses with fuzzy guesstimated walleye "hooking mortality" assessments to drive 'em over the unscientific low quota, and hit 'em with a Sept. 6 complete shutdown.

The Mille Lacs PR storm intensified after the Sept. 23 resignation of Jamie Edwards, Mille Lacs Band director of government affairs, from the DNR's 17-member Mille Lacs Fisheries Advisory Committee. Billed as MLFAC's "lone tribal representative," his resignation letter to DNR Commissioner Tom Landwehr and copied to Gov. Mark Dayton inspired an avalanche of unfair negative press for Mille Lacs and for MLFAC, smearing the latter as anti-science and anti-tribal.

Here's a biggie. Unreported by state officials, even to MLFAC leadership: letters from tribal officials asking Gov. Dayton to disband MLFAC! The request to abolish MLFAC was mentioned by Eric Eskola on the Oct. 21 edition of Twin Cities Public Television's "Almanac," where Edwards was a guest.

I obtained copies of the three letters to Gov. Dayton. They were from Melanie Benjamin, Mille Lacs Band chief executive, Sept. 15; Kevin R. Dupuis Sr., Fond du Lac Band chairman, Oct. 21; and James Zorn, executive director of the Great Lakes Indian Fish & Wildlife Commission, representing six Wisconsin bands, Oct 21. The tribal co-managers of Mille Lacs disparaged Minnesota DNR's citizen advisory group, and called on Gov. Dayton to end it.

I observed all 13 DNR-hosted and DNR-run MLFAC meetings over the past year. I heard no anti-Indian comments from members. Mr. Edwards was rarely present and faced no flak. It's not anti-science or anti-tribal to discuss how Mille Lacs co-management plays out. Minnesota's DNR formed MLFAC for input on the state's

side of co-management. Why should any tribal officials be on that committee, especially after their disband-MLFAC requests?

It would cost millions annually to buy the gigantic waves of bad publicity spawned by the workings of state-tribal co-management of Mille Lacs. Ad space is one thing. But features and editorials carry way more punch. Add radio, television, and Internet activity. The Edwards resignation alone triggered multi-media coverage across Minnesota and beyond, from the Miami Herald to newspapers in Scotts Bluff, Neb, Owosso, Mich., Reading, Pa., Muskogee, Okla., Bristol, Va., Clay Center, Kan., and others.

Talk about a killer attack on what traditionally was Minnesota's largest and most-celebrated walleye sport fishery—on water and on ice. The extended Mille Lacs fishing community includes generations of cabin owners, resort patrons, visiting anglers from near and far, lake town residents, and thousands of folks connected to the Mille Lacs region. These days, sadly, if "Mille Lacs" comes up in bars, barber shops, bait shops, resorts, restaurants, and wherever else, the themes include crash, crisis, demise, management woes, gill netting, and negatives galore.

What a public-policy disaster that slams and victimizes the far-flung Mille Lacs sport-fishing family, and damages Minnesota's state and citizen interests. Indefensible! How can indifferent state officials remain loyal to this harmful and unjustifiable system?

Intolerable negatives

Thanks to a college ethics class, I often remind friends about the Principle of the Double Effect. Naturally, laws and government policies carry positive and negative impacts. The good should far exceed anything bad. But when the negatives—the bad costs at many levels—far outweigh any positives, then we have unethical policy. That's the situation with the Mille Lacs storm. State and tribal officials who sit on it, and defend it, should be held accountable.

Consider the negatives.

- 1) The biggest PR disaster and ongoing controversy for a fishing community in the history of Minnesota fishing, fisheries management, and fishing-related tourism.
- 2) Unprecedented levels of distrust and resentment toward Minnesota's DNR. (Thank political extremist fisheries management.)
- 3) Inordinate DNR time, focus, and money demanded by the Mille Lacs co-management system.
- 4) The widespread, mistaken belief that Mille Lacs walleyes have disappeared. (Thank the Mille Lacs-unique co-management extremism, where every wiggle of every statistical needle triggers new quotas, regs, headlines, and public reactions.)

5) Large drop (80 or 90 percent or more?) from traditional walleye-fishing effort, with unacceptable impacts on the related economy.

6) Horrible impacts on Mille Lacs- Lacs-connected lives—endless uncertainty about the future, lack of optimism, gloomy political and social environments, and high stress levels. Thank the black cloud that never lifts.

There's more. For example, last year Gov. Dayton responded to the anti-DNR feelings by scapegoating Aitkin area Fisheries personnel, suggesting they take public relations courses. Hey, Governor. Blame the sad and unethical workings of the state-tribal co-management system.

The dramatic Sept. 6 walleye-fishing shutdown, reversing the earlier no-shutdown decision, came with the dishonest line there'd be little harm because Mille Lacs hosts minimal fall fishing and business.

Really? Traditionally Mille Lacs ranked as one of Minnesota's top fall-fishing draws, day and night! Typical autumn evenings saw reefs and shore drops lit up like Christmas trees.

Related stuff

MLFAC members' questioning tribal gill-netting on walleye spawning grounds and calling it "culturally offensive" draws unfair criticism. Tribal enrollees have no monopoly on culture. Non-Indians also have culture and cultural sensitivities. Gill-netting game fish, especially during the spawn, is offensive to most Minnesotans. Today's tribal leaders often sidestep traditional Ojibwe culture, which cared about other people.

Too often, the misplayed race card shuts down discussion and debate of tribal-related policymaking. Is there a principle in government, politics, journalism, and academia that exempts the actions of tribal leaders and tribal natural-resource managers, like taxpayer-funded GLIFWC, from due scrutiny, questions, and criticism?

Which tribal personnel got Gov. Dayton to shut down Mille Lacs walleye fishing?

Some months ago, *Star Tribune* outdoor writer Dennis Anderson lectured Mille Lacs anglers to trust state and tribal co-managers to do everything right, and to just "shut up and fish." Anderson has dismissed Mille Lacs concerns and questions as "yippling"—which calls to mind the major role of media in defending and insulating the unjustifiable co-management system and its impacts.

MLFAC leadership is right in saying the protocols governing co management are "not written in stone" and should be changed. End the indefensible Mille Lacs crap storm!