HISTORICAL MICHIGAN FISHING HERITAGE UNDER ATTACK

In an unprecedented act of discrimination against one of Michigan’s oldest angling methods, the Michigan Muskie Alliance – Muskies, Inc. Chapter 47, president William E. Schultz II, is attempting to petition the Michigan Department of Natural Resources to ban darkhouse angling, winter spear fishing for muskellunge, “on all lakes and rivers currently on the (DNR) approved stocking list”. Schultz and his muskie group are attempting something that “anti” hunting and fishing groups, such as PETA, have been waiting a long time for, which is to have hunting and fishing groups fighting amongst themselves.

For an organized hunting or fishing group like the Michigan Muskie Alliance to openly attack the legal harvest methods of another angling group is inexcusable. In a letter from Michigan Muskie Alliance president, William E. Schultz, to Bob Johnson, President of the 20,000+ members Michigan Muskie Alliance, he bases his attack on winter spear fishermen as a money issue. He states, “Our organization (Michigan Muskie Alliance) was responsible for 60% of the muskies stocked in Michigan last year. What did the spear community do? I’ll make a deal with you, get the spear organizations in each state to match the money that is being provided by muskie fisherman and Muskies, Inc. chapters for stocking, research and habitat, and I’ll drop the spear ban issue. If you are wondering, that will be over $100,000 this year.”

In response, Bob Johnson, Minnesota Darkhouse and Angling Association, said, “I’ll tell you how things are here in MN. First of all, in addition to our fishing licenses we (spearfishermen) supply our DNR with an additional $300,000 in the form of spear and darkhouse licenses. Now, what do we get for our money? Nothing! We have been banned from 37 of the very best pike lakes because our DNR along with Muskie, Inc. have stocked muskies in them, and they are afraid we may mistake a muskie for a pike. Anyone that has ever seen a muskie in the hole knows that this is not a likely probability. Most of the lakes now stocked never had a muskie living in them prior to 1963. In addition to the bans, we are continually being forced to deal with “experimental” size regulations (slot limits) on 70 lakes.”

In a survey of Minnesota fishermen, it was found that <2% are muskie fishermen. Why talk about Minnesota when we live in Michigan? The issues are the same. Muskies, Inc. seems to think that because their dollars support muskies, the DNR fisheries division is obligated to them to make regulations protecting their financial investment. Their attitude can be likened to members of an exclusive private golf course in a rich suburb of Detroit. They pay big money for their golfing, expect to get what they want because of their financial contributions, and then exclude the working public who can’t afford to join.

Last year, 2002, Michigan sold 1,313,000 fishing licenses, down 100,000 from the year 2000. Fishing license sales generate about $55 million dollars a year. All Michigan anglers pay for the right to fish without discrimination. So why then would a group like the Michigan Muskie Alliance attack this historic angling group’s method of harvesting fish? Why does the Michigan Muskie Alliance feel they have more of the right to regulate muskies by requesting the Michigan DNR to discriminate against another angling group?

A good majority of fishermen fish because they like to eat fish. The muskie groups are like the playground “bullies”, who want you to play the game their way, or else. They want to protect their way of angling at the cost of discriminating against any other angling group’s methods. And, “heaven forbid” you should eat one. Muskies are excellent tasting. Smoked, they are a delicacy. The Michigan Muskie Alliance will tell you that they are not advocating a “no kill” fishery. Really? What do you think a 42” size limit is? Ask any field fish biologist in muskie country, and they will tell you they get many requests weekly from muskie fishermen wanting to know where they can catch “a 50” muskie”. The field fish biologists will tell you that a 50” size limit on muskie is a “no kill” fishery. Last spring in Wisconsin, some self-serving muskie groups and muskie guides from the northern part of the state proposed a 50” size limit on muskie at the Wisconsin Conservation Congress spring convention. In Wisconsin, all hunting and fishing rules must be “voted on” by the hunting and fishing clubs. The 50” size limit was “overwhelmingly” voted down with a lot of resentment toward the muskie groups from other angling groups.

Also last spring, the Minnesota DNR attempted to pass an unpopular legislative bill that would have restricted the harvesting of northern pike between 24” and 36”. The bill was supported by muskie and “trophy” pike groups. This law, if it had passed, would have been the end to darkhouse spear fishing in Minnesota. Alerted to the proposed DNR bill, the Minnesota Darkhouse and Angling Association requested help from other fishing and hunting organizations. Over the next four months the organized groups collected 250,000 signatures, OPPOSED, to 24” to 36”, size limit. The measure was unanimously defeated by the Minnesota legislature. I wonder how much fish license money was wasted on this attempt by the Minnesota fish biologists to impose rules not wanted or needed on the fishing community.

The fishing public is tired of all these restrictions: slot sizes, trophy lakes, no kill, catch and release, and trophy size regulations. We like to eat fish. If it happens to be a 40” pike, or 42” musky, so be it. It doesn’t have to be a trophy fish. We are just as happy catching a 30” pike for dinner.

Fishermen numbers are down 100,000 in just two years. It’s no wonder. Unnecessary and unwanted size and creel limit restrictions imposed every year by the DNR Fisheries Division puts more and more fish species “out of reach” to the fishermen who like to eat fish.

Spear fishing through the ice from a darkhouse, an ice shack with no windows, has an historic place in Michigan. The first recorded accounts of spear fishing through the ice was reported in 1763 by Alexander Henry, a fur trader, in the Fort Mackinac area. He described the use of lead-filled fish decoys being used to attract fish so that they could be harvested with a spear.

The fish decoy has a rich heritage in Michigan. Michigan hosts the Great Lakes Fish Decoy Collectors & Carvers Association, World Championships every September in Monroe. Hundreds of beautifully carved and functional fish decoys are judged on their swimming ability and looks. Over 400 fish decoy entries and 80 carvers from 11 states and 3 foreign countries compete.

Is darkhouse spear fishing popular? Well, on Lake Winnebago in Wisconsin, where it is legal to harvest sturgeon through the ice using a spear, it seems to be. Wisconsin has a highly controlled spear fishing season. In 2003, 847 sturgeon were
harvested. Spearfishermen must stop at noon of each day and register their catch. The sturgeon spearing season closes when the number of adult/juvenile females registered approaches 400. This is the total allowable catch regarded by the Wisconsin DNR fish biologists to be the yearly harvest level. Sturgeon spearing is very popular. In 1960, the Wisconsin DNR issued just 2,688 spearing licenses. By 1990, that had grown to 8,557 and the number jumped to 40,276 in 2000.

Darkhouse spearfishermen practice a form of "catch and release". We call it "look and release". Unlike the average hook and line fishermen, who must injure the pike or muskie in order to "release" it, the darkhouse angler can simply watch and observe the pike or muskie swim in and hit the fish decoy. If it is of legal size, the darkhouse angler can "choose" to harvest the fish, or simply watch it swim away, uninjured. That is his right under Michigan law. Minnesota fisheries research has shown that winter spearfishermen harvest a very low percentage of the fish harvested by both spear and hook and line fishing.

Again, then, the question must be asked. Why is the Michigan Muskie Alliance attacking our angling method? Pikemasters, Inc., another Michigan based "protectionist" group feel the same way about Northern Pike. Only this group takes it one step further. In an article to the Pikemasters publication, Waterwolf, Winter ’02-’03, which, by the way, due to lack of support is no longer being published, Joe Bednar, Michigan editor, in his article, Slaughter On The Hard Water, states in part, "Few would debate that on most stateside pike lakes, the majority of pike removed by fishing pressure in a given year are taken during the relatively short winter season. Depending on the size of the fishery and the amount of harvest pressure focused on pike, the impact of this overuse can be severe to say the least". He continues after showing a one-sided winter research on a New York and Wisconsin lake. “Winter take verses the rest of the year was not quantified in either case, but even if just half of total take was in the few winter months, WHICH I SUBMIT IS LIKELY A MAJOR UNDERSTATEMENT, you can get an idea of the impact of a TYPICAL WINTER ON MANY PIKE POPULATIONS.”

Does this mean that Pikemasters, Inc. advocates that over a million Michigan fishermen and darkhouse anglers should give up ice fishing, too, so Pikemasters, Inc. and the Michigan Muskie Alliance can have a "catch and release" fishery for their summer angling fun. For example, that "on line" discriminatory, "anti" darkhouse angling petition? It has 827 signatures, 535 from "out-of-state" muskie fishermen and only 292 from Michigan.

The Bay De Noc Great Lakes Sportsfishermen, Inc. went on record at its June 10, 2003 meeting, supporting winter darkhouse spearing for northern pike and muskie.

All the fishing groups in Michigan must stand up and defend all angling methods. One angler put it this way, “Solidarity among hunters and fishermen is critical. The outdoor sports are already under a tremendous amount of pressure. Bans on bear hunting, deer baiting, using dogs to pursue bears, bow hunting, trapping, bow fishing, etc. PETA just sits back and looks at an end to musky spearing as one more feather in their cap. We will do it to ourselves, they don’t have to. Today it’s musky spearing, tomorrow its deer hunting; next year it’s barbed hooks; five years from now it’s hook and line fishing.”

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