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Walleye Fishery Recovery Project Red Lake Department of Natural Resources Red Lake Band of Chippewa Indians

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The Red Lake Band of Chippewa Indians have long depended on the fish that live in Red Lake, the sixth largest body of freshwater in the United States. Both the waters and walleye of the lake are central to the Red Lake Band people, its history, economy, and culture. But by the mid-1990s, the walleye population had collapsed from over-fishing. Taking drastic but necessary action, the Band negotiated a consensus arrangement with local fishermen and state and federal officials to ban fishing in the lake. Over a ten-year period the fish recovered at an astonishing rate. The tribally led Red Lake Recovery Project now determines when, how, and who can fish the historic waters from which the Band claims its name.

The Red Lake Band of Chippewa Indians reside on its aboriginal homelands along the shores of Red Lake in the northern part of Minnesota. The Native nation's isolated, rural reservation encompasses over 825,000 acres of land and water, including 85% of Red Lake. For centuries, the Band relied on its namesake lake as its cultural lifeblood. Regarding it as a gift from their creator, generations of Red Lake Chippewa relied on the lake's fish primarily the walleye as their main source of sustenance. Fishing is a cultural and economic pillar in the community, providing Band citizens with a sense of purpose, identity, and independence.

In the mid-1990s, the Lake's walleye population collapsed. Years of over-fishing rooted in practices begun in the early part of the 20th century were the cause of this dramatic decline. World War I food shortages had prompted the establishment of a commercial fishery on Red Lake, one of the largest freshwater operations in the U.S. For decades, it employed static, nonscientific harvest quota for walleye and did little to regulate numbers. The Red Lake Fisheries Association (RLFA), a cooperative of the Band's commercial fishermen, also failed to control the number of citizens setting gill nets on Red Lake. Cooperative members routinely asked for quota extensions, which regardless of the lake's biological status, were always granted. On the State's side of the lake, scores of non-Indian fishermen consistently exceeded their walleye catch limits. And, in addition to this officially sanctioned harvest, many Indian and non-Indian fishermen were active participants in a flourishing black market, driven by soaring walleye prices. Estimates suggest that unofficial takings doubled the annual legal harvest of walleye. Altogether, the lack of enforcement by and communication between the managers on both sides of Red Lake encouraged rampant over-fishing.

These conditions led numerous Red Lake citizens to seek a living in commercial fishing. The RLFA saw its membership surge from 200 to 700 by the early 1990s and its documented

annual harvest top out at 950,000 pounds. By 1996, however, the RLFA harvested only 15,000 pounds. The Red Lake walleye had been pushed to the brink of extinction.

Witnessing the rapid decline of the walleye, the Red Lake Band government responded with a multi-pronged plan that included scientific study, state-of-the-art data collection, monitoring, and analysis. The plan also involved collaboration with the RLFA to end tribal citizen walleye fishing until the fish stock could recover. To decrease non-Indian harvests, the Band entered into formal agreements with the State. These efforts were supported by enforcement strategies to ensure compliance.

The Chippewa fishermen made the ultimate sacrifice to save the walleye. In 1997, in response to evidence presented by the tribal government about the future of fishing on Red Lake, the RLFA voted by an overwhelming margin to discontinue all commercial gill net fishing. The fishermen agreed that giving up their livelihoods in the short term which they did even in the absence of subsidies was the only way to save the walleye. If they continued fishing, they would lose not only this cultural resource but also any future income. A year later, the Band prohibited all subsistence fishing by hook and line. Having lost their main source of income, many fishermen were forced to look elsewhere for work, selling their boats and gear.

The Band's significant investment in generating scientific data about the Lake's biological health provided its fishermen with the necessary background to make informed decisions. The investment also empowered the tribe to take this message to non-tribal governments. At first, the State of Minnesota was uncooperative, since the Band's jurisdiction extended to only 85% of the lake. But, being certain of its methods and scientific conclusions, the Band knew the walleye population was in trouble. The tribe recognized that in order to establish sustainability it needed to approach the lake as a single, whole ecosystem as opposed to two bodies of water separated by a jurisdiction line. The Band again approached the State, even though there was no pre-existing relationship, and proposed a fish restoration partnership.

Dialogue with Minnesota's Department of Natural Resources followed, and a historic agreement was signed in 1999. Working in conjunction with the Band's established natural resource policies, the intergovernmental agreement prohibited walleye fishing in Red Lake's state waters, mandated strict regulation of the moratorium on both sides of the lake, and established a multi-partner technical committee to develop and manage the walleye recovery effort. The technical committee is composed of scientists from the Band, State, Bureau of Indian Affairs, and the University of Minnesota. Relying on mutual respect, shared science, and consensus decision-making, the committee aggressively implemented an unprecedented restoration plan that incorporated massive fry stockings; stringent enforcement of the fishing ban; and comprehensive data collection to track the quantity, maturity, diversity, and natural reproduction capability of the walleye population. In a true demonstration of cooperation, the Band and the State agreed to equally share the cost of the restoration.

The partnership with Minnesota did not stop at recovery. While the agreement was set for ten years, there are renewal opportunities. The agreement specifically spells out the importance of future management of walleye on a sustainable basis. The technical committee will continue to meet on a regular basis and fishery assessments will be conducted indefinitely. The solid working relationship of the technical committee has helped break down barriers between the Band and the State. Both are committed to a common goal to do the right thing for a natural resource that benefits all.

Many experts, citing the failure of past walleye recovery projects, doubted the effort could

succeed given the lake's immense size and jurisdictional complexity. The technical committee, aware of the many challenges it faced, estimated it would take 10 years for the Red Lake walleye to rebound to a naturally reproducing, self-sustaining level. By allowing the scientists and policy makers to base decisions on sound biological principles, rather than economic or popular pressures, the effort has far exceeded even the most optimistic expectations. In just seven years, the walleye have rebounded from an all-time low of 100,000 to approximately 7.5 million, including several years with strong classes that indicate the stock is healthy. Deemed as one of the most successful inland fishery recoveries in North American history, this resurgence prompted the Band and State to reopen Red Lake to subsistence and sport fishing in the spring of 2006, years ahead of schedule.

The Red Lake Walleye Recovery Project demonstrates how tribal governments, in addressing problems of cultural, social, and economic importance, can also significantly strengthen their sovereignty. This is one of the leading cases of fish population recovery in North America. It was accomplished by a collective effort of tribal citizens, fishermen, agencies, and governments, all determined to preserve resources for future generations. According to the Chippewa fishermen, subsistence and commercial fishing brings a sense of pride as they provide for both their families and for the nation. This recovery effort restores the promise of cultural continuity, economic means, and pride to the community. The walleye have returned to Red Lake and the Band intends for them to stay.

Lessons:

- With creative and strategic thinking, economic development and the preservation of important cultural resources can go hand-in-hand.
- Effective assertions of sovereignty are backed by data, credible public policy, capable tribal administration, and sound governing institutions.
- Successful government programs tribal and non-tribal hire qualified staff and empower them to make decisions on the issues they know best.

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