

LAKE WINNIPEG FISHING

**A BRIEF OVERVIEW ON ABORIGINAL FISHING ON LAKE
WINNIPEG**

**PREPARED BY PEGUIS FIRST NATION FOR THE CLEAN
ENVIRONMENT COMMISSION**

**PREPARED BY LLOYD STEVENSON
PEGUIS FIRST NATION, JANUARY 28, 2015**

INTRODUCTION

Manitoba Hydro was granted an interim licence that was granted on November 18, 1970 and a supplementary interim licence on August 8, 1972. Manitoba Hydro is now seeking a final licence under the Manitoba Water Power Act and has produced a document called Lake Winnipeg Regulation. This document is in support for a final licence and certain sections in that may or may not address all concerns.

Section 4.5 of the document deals with the Commercial Fishing on Lake Winnipeg and this submission will use that section as an avenue to bring forward the matters raised by Peguis First Nation. Fishing is unique to First Nation Fishers and much can be said about the Fishing industry, a primary industry that has helped sustain First Nations for centuries. Matters raised will attempt to stay within the confines of the Lake Winnipeg Regulation although some history of Lake Winnipeg fish harvesting may be relevant to provide an overall picture that led us to the current state of affairs.

LAKE WINNIPEG

Lake Winnipeg is the largest lake in Manitoba with a surface area of 23,750 square kilometers and a length of 436 kilometers and a maximum width of 111 kilometers.

The lake is divided into north and south basins which are connected by a narrow passage or channel. Lake Winnipeg has three major tributaries, the Red River, the Saskatchewan River and the Winnipeg River and many smaller tributaries (rivers) and creeks. Lake Winnipeg has an average depth of 12 meters and a maximum depth of 36 meters in a small area of the channel. The lake is drained by the Nelson River north into Hudson Bay. (preliminary report by Gislason).

FISH SPECIES

Lake whitefish (*coregones clupeaformis*)

Pickrel or walleye (*stizostedion vitreum*)

Sauger (*stizostedion canadense*)

Northern pike or jack (*esox lucius*)

Yellow perch (*perca flavescens*)

Tulibee or ciscoe (*coregones artedii*)

Burbot or maria (*lota lota*)

Mullet or sucker (*castomus commersoni*)

Silverbass or sheepshead or freshwater drum (*caplodinotus grunniens*)

Carp (*cyprinus carpo*)

Channel catfish (*ictalurus punctatus*)

Goldeye (*hiodon alosoides*)

Sturgeon (*acipenser fulvescens*) (Gislason)

Not all species are listed and the list above reflects the majority of the species. The main commercial species are whitefish, pickerel, sauger, and to a lesser extent pike. Pickerel, sauger, and pike are piscivores (diet is fish) unlike whitefish. Pickerel, sauger and pike spawn in the spring while whitefish spawn in the late fall. Sturgeon stocks have been depleted due to overfishing, habitat loss, and the long maturation period. The sturgeon fishery on Lake Winnipeg is now closed. The carp species was introduced into Lake Winnipeg in the 1930s and more recently smelt in around 1990. (Preliminary report by Gislason). The Lake Winnipeg fishery has two major components - a subsistence fishery in which the fish is used as food for the immediate and extended family and a commercial fishery for which the fish is sold. Recreational fishing although present is not a major component.

HISTORY

First Nations have fished on Lake Winnipeg for centuries and most of the fishing was for subsistence. Many settlements are located near river systems as the rivers also served as highways to go inland for trapping and hunting. The sturgeon was once one of the main staples for food. The sturgeon was also used for oil and the bladder was used for glue. The skin of the sturgeon was used as a bottle or container and did not break or crack as earthenware or glass. The scutes on the back of the skin prevented the dogs from chewing the sturgeon container.

Dog teams were the main means of transportation during the winter before snowmobiles and bombardier. Whitefish was used for food for the family and food for the dogs. On long trips with the dog team, the hunter or the fisherman could live off the land for himself and his dogs.

Aboriginal fishermen's subsistence type of harvesting began to change in the 1880's when commercial fishing on Lake Winnipeg began in a modest way and gradually grew to a point that it threatened the subsistence type of fishing. Aboriginal fishers gradually adapted to this new way of fishing as it also provided some employment as tending nets and hauling fish.

The early fish buying companies and traders began to grow and most of the harvested fish were sold to American markets. One fish official described the whitefish of the waters to the buffalo on the lands. (Frank Tough). In this period the emerging small scale market oriented fishing was eventually displaced by export-oriented companies.

Aboriginal fishers began to press for more conservation and regulation measures in order to maintain the subsistence use of the resource. Already the fish stocks were over exploited and the sturgeon fishery was depleted. Both government regulations and capital fishing served to further alienate Aboriginal fishers from the resources and to diminish their influence over the future of the regional economy. (Frank Tough).

One chief from Berens River in 1890 stated that when treaties were made it was promised that they could still hunt as before and continue fishing as before like their grandfathers did and accordingly, "the waters should be ours". (Frank Tough).

Some government officials found the Treaties and the regulation of the fishery to be inconsistent and it appeared the regulation was in conflict with the Treaties. One missionary of the Church Missionary Society by the name of Phair described the situation as, "The water is just as much a means of support to the Indian as the land; why should he not have some protection against those who come to his very door and take fish from his children". (Frank Tough).

COMMISSIONS OF INQUIRY OR INVESTIGATIONS

Numerous complaints by the fishers on Lake Winnipeg led to at least 6 commissions of inquiry. One of the early commissions of inquiry for inland fisheries was the Royal Commission in 1909-1910 by the Dominion Fisheries Commission for Manitoba and the North West. Fishermen were complaining of abusive exploitation, declining fish stocks, and too much catering to a foreign market. The report that was presented to the Federal Government concluded:

1. Lake Winnipeg was overfished,
2. Whitefish and yellow perch decreased in size and abundance,
3. Fisheries were unduly controlled by foreign fish operators,
4. Manitoba people benefitted little from lake fisheries.

The final report issued by the Federal Government was watered down and made no reference to foreign fish operators or the foreign fish markets. (Frank Tough).

Again in the 1960's the fishermen on Lake Winnipeg and other inland lakes made complaints that expressed concerns over the depletion of the fishery, the extent of American influence and control over the industry, the low returns and the weak

bargaining power of fishermen and poor product quality. As a result the federal McIvor Commission Report of 1966 called for the formation of a government run single desk selling agency for freshwater fish. This recommendation was followed and in May 1969 the Freshwater Fish Marketing Corporation (FFMC) was created as a federal Crown Corporation and given exclusive jurisdiction over the interprovincial and export trade in freshwater fish for western Canada. The FFMC had three goals:

1. Increase returns to fishermen,
2. To promote orderly marketing,
3. To increase interprovincial and export trade in freshwater fish. (Gislason)

Another event that affected the fisheries in Lake Winnipeg was the closure of all fishing on Lake Winnipeg in 1970 and 1971 due to mercury contamination caused by pulp and paper mills on the Winnipeg and Saskatchewan River systems. Some fishermen claim that another reason for closure was the overfishing by the fish dealers with the use of trapnets. As a result of FFMC coming into the picture there was a drastic decline of fish stations. Prior to FFMC there was a proliferation of fish stations and a good example at Black Bear where there were 4 different fish stations in one localized area. Gislason states there are currently 15 fish stations on Lake Winnipeg. Gislason also states that in 1972 the individual quota (IQ) system was introduced, the retirement licence was created in 1977 and finally in 1995 the community quota was allowed.

OBSERVATIONS BY FISHERS

Prior to the Lake Winnipeg Regulation at Jenpeg, the currents in Lake Winnipeg would flow in more than one direction. At times the current would flow in a north-south

direction and now the current flows only in one direction, that is south-north. The current which is a part of the hydrology has an important role in the migration of fish and the overall robustness of the fishery. (Joy MacLean). The current intensifies in the winter when Manitoba Hydro releases a large volume of water at Jenpeg. The faster current creates a more dangerous situation for winter ice fishing. At places of strong current the ice would not freeze as thick as other parts of the lake. The fishing net acts like a windsock. When there is a strong current the net would stretch and bow. Too much current results in a net becoming tangled or bunching up. As the current intensifies, this will impact the spawning grounds of the fish as the eggs will be flushed north in the direction of the current. Favourite spawning grounds for pickerel, sauger, whitefish, and tulibee is the sandy gravel bottom. (MacLean). Spawning is also affected by water temperature, depth of water and of course current. Hydrological changes such as hydro dams are a cause for concern by the fishers.

The continual high water and the increased current has been a factor in the erosion of some of the islands in Lake Winnipeg. For example the islands of Big Tamarack and Little Tamarack were approximately $\frac{1}{2}$ mile apart and now the distance between the two islands is 4 miles. Erosion can cover up natural fish beds and the fish feeding habitats. High water and erosion affect the natural harbours where the fish plants are located. In the last 4 years, fish plants and harbours at McBeth Point and Goodman's Landing had to be reinforced by rock and gravel to keep the harbours and fish plants in an operating position.

On the matter of pollution, the fishers agree that algae has always been present and there is no dispute there. However, the algae seems to be getting worse. Whenever there is algae present, the fish would avoid the algae. The algae affects nets as the nets become heavier and nets are clogged. Algae feeds on oxygen and thus competes with the fish for oxygen. The algae grows as a result of phosphates and nitrates and if the lake is depleted of oxygen the fisheries would be lost as well as recreation along the lake.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. That the power licence be held in abeyance until the dangerous ice conditions are mitigated.
2. That the power licence be held in abeyance until the current conditions are alleviated.
3. That the power licence be held in abeyance until the spawning grounds are alleviated.
4. That the power licence be held in abeyance until erosion is lessened.
5. Changes have to be made with the influx of phosphates and nitrates.
6. That the power licence be held in abeyance until mercury testing is conducted around Lake Winnipeg.

REFERENCES

Frank Tough, *As Their Natural Resources Fail*, UBC Press, 1996

Joy MacLean, *Fathoming Lake Winnipeg*, A thesis for Master of Natural Resource Management, 2010.

G.S. Gislason, *Preliminary Report on Peguis Fishing Loss*, 2002 unpublished.