

## **Mille Lacs 'Hooking Mortality' Scam: Punishing anglers for conservation?**

By Joe Fellegy    Outdoor News    March 15, 2013

Catch-and-release fishing—anglers unhooking and letting fish go—is a given in Minnesota's sport-fishing world. Live-release is positively embraced by conservationists, tournament pros, and plain-folks anglers. And it's used by managers to influence fish numbers and sizes.

Outside DNR's Mille Lacs treaty management and its annual "safe allowable harvests" (quotas), where is "hooking mortality" a big issue? When calculating walleye harvest at Mille Lacs, anglers are assessed estimated hooking-mortality—pounds of walleyes that die via release. Those thousands of guesstimated release-mortality pounds plus guesstimated pounds of kept walleyes equals total walleye kill by state-licensed anglers.

Think of it. Penalizing a sport-fishing community for practicing conservation—in this case releasing walleyes via regulation! The hooking mortality assessment adds to the hassle, debates over extremist regs, and even fear of possible shut-down at Mille Lacs under treaty management. Unbelievably, the more they're forced to release, the more Mille Lacs anglers are punished!

Consider the broader world of catch-and-release. There's voluntary release, a conservation ethic, which took off in the 1960s and 1970s with bass and muskies, and with walleyes in the 1980s. Also, on hundreds of Minnesota lakes and streams, release is required by harvest slots (length zones wherein fish may be kept); and protected slots (length zones wherein fish must be released). Anglers observe minimum and maximum length limits, which also require release.

Whether a voluntary good-sport practice or a management tool mandated by statewide law or by waters-specific reg, a main premise is that most let-go fish live. They contribute to a fish population's health and to quality fishing. Where, beyond Mille Lacs, must anglers and fisheries managers obsess and worry about minority percentages of fish that don't survive catch-and-release?

Under extremist Treaty Fisheries Management at Mille Lacs, especially given this year's slashed "safe allowable harvest," there's heavy focus

on the hooking-mortality penalty, which could push state-licensed sport anglers over the precipice. (The numbers for walleyes kept and walleyes released come from DNR's random creel-survey interviews at public and resort accesses.)

### **A 15-year exemption!**

Why punish Mille Lacs sport anglers with a hooking-mortality assessment for practicing conservation? It's got anglers, resorters, and DNR managers worried and uncertain over what should be a non-issue. It's inexcusable and must end. I'd argue that the Mille Lacs sport-fishing community deserves a 15-year exemption from unnecessary and unfair hooking-mortality assessments.

After all, through 15 years of separate state and tribal fisheries and "co-management" at Mille Lacs, not a pound of mortality has been assessed on the tons of unwanted northern pike annually "released" by tribal gillnetters. Ask veteran tullibee netters (like me), or DNR fisheries biologists who use gill nets in fish population surveys. Given how toothy pike behave in gill nets—twisting and tangling, often with gills wrapped tightly in net mesh—fair-minded and honest folks might suggest a 50- to 70-percent mortality assessment on often-doomed "released" gill-netted pike.

Face it. Here's a real conservation issue, not a contrived one like hooking mortality. Yet, it's gone unaddressed with no release-mortality assessments. For 15 years, tribal managers and tribal harvesters, unlike state-licensed anglers and DNR managers, haven't faced possible netting shut-down because of pike-release mortality, a legitimate conservation concern.

### **Mille Lacs led on release**

Instead of being hit with unfair hooking-mortality assessments, Mille Lacs resorters and anglers deserve top-rate treatment—especially by state fisheries managers—for their history-making boost of walleye-release in Minnesota. In the early and mid-1980s they inspired a statewide revolution promoting release of keeper-size walleyes.

Traditionally, walleye anglers released mainly little fish under 12- to 14 inches. "Let 'em grow up, eh?" Enter big change. In 1984, the Mille Lacs Lake Advisory Association (MLLAA), comprised of resorters and anglers, launched a voluntary catch-and-release program aimed at popularizing the release ethic among walleye anglers. There were

Catch & Release "I Do" stickers with a recycle logo and "Over 16 Inches" in bold type. Catch-and-release rulers were distributed at resorts and bait shops—changing the focus from pounds to inches. Resorters displayed catch-and-release honor rolls in their lodges.

In 1986, through Project CORE (Cooperative Opportunities for Resource Enhancement) the Mille Lacs group worked with DNR to produce a Mille Lacs "Catch and Release" Diary. Anglers could record their release data — date, species, length, location, bottom type, depth, bait, etc. The diary booklets also contained several pages explaining the value of release and listing contact info for local conservation officers and DNR Fisheries offices. Anglers often shared release data with DNR managers.

The Mille Lacs effort inspired lake groups elsewhere to launch their own catch-and-release programs. Also in the 1980s, the MLLAA teamed with the Minnesota Sportfishing Congress (MSC) and backed legislation enabling DNR to manage outside the statewide angling regs. Thus, Mille Lacs visionaries helped begin the modern era of experimental and special regs, often called individual-waters management.

Mille Lacs resorters and anglers played a pivotal role in promoting release ethics and release-based management. What an impact! Hey, give `em some credit for millions of conservation pounds across Minnesota! And free `em from today's hooking-mortality scam.