

All parties invited to discuss fishing agreement

Editor:

Attention anglers! Attention community leaders! Attention conservationists! Attention community businesses! Attention First Nations!

Are we truly concerned about the future of sport fishing in Owen Sound and Colpoys Bay? Are we concerned about the volunteer sport fish rearing programs by local clubs? Are we concerned about sustaining and enhancing our sport fish populations and fish conservation? Are we concerned about our fishing image on the world stage, tourism and the international reputation we have achieved as one of North America's premiere sport fishing destinations? Are we concerned about the huge economic spin-off benefits that a healthy sport fishery generates within the fishing industry, our fishing tackle shops, the marinas, restaurants, motels and much more? Are we concerned about waterfowl conservation? Are we concerned about boater safety and the loss of and damage to fishing gear, boats and marine equipment? Are we concerned about improving relations with MNR and First Nations people?

If you agree on some or all counts, then this is your invitation to attend an upcoming town hall style, non-confronta-

tional information meeting on the recently released fishing agreement between MNR and the Saugeen Ojibway Nation (SON). The meeting has been arranged by concerned anglers and is scheduled for Saturday, April 27 in the club house lounge at the Hepworth-Shallow Lake Legion, located in Hepworth. Start time for the morning meeting is 9 a.m.

Concerned anglers would like to see a large contingent in attendance to offer their thoughts on where do we go from here on the new SON commercial fishing agreement, which could adversely impact sportfish, lake trout and whitefish populations and sport fishing in Owen Sound and Colpoys Bay, and beyond. This is not a segregated forum. As stated above, the First Nations chiefs are invited to attend to offer their input.

Aside from a predicted marked decline in the sportfishery in Owen Sound and Colpoys Bays, we are looking at potentially significant mortality rates on wild and stocked rainbow trout, brown trout and chinook salmon that will be captured and killed in non-selective gill nets. We are looking at the potential end of major fishing tournaments, such as the Owen Sound Salmon Spectacular. We are potentially looking at our

communities no longer being a formidable tourist fishing destination. We are looking at our club hatcheries possibly closing their doors. MNR's attempt to re-establish self-sustaining lake trout stocks in the waters of southwestern Georgian Bay is in trouble. Will over-fishing lead to the end of this restoration effort?

Gill netting in Owen Sound and Colpoys Bay is not just a trout and salmon issue. We are looking at the indiscriminate killing of waterfowl and other diving birds, such as loons, who become entangled in gill net mesh. Both bays are becoming increasingly significant stopover, winter resting and feeding waters for these various bird species.

We are looking at marine equipment damage due to entanglements in gill net sets, not to mention the threat of boater safety. Have we forgotten about the four anglers who drowned near Manitoulin Island when their fishing boat sank after being pulled under when their downriggers became tangled in a gill net?

For all of the above reasons, sport and commercial fishing are just not compatible in our local waters. Both cannot co-exist in the confined environment of Owen Sound and Colpoys Bay due to so many conflicts.

There is a solution. Owen Sound and Colpoys Bay should be declared sanctuary waters by MNR and SON from all forms of commercial fishing. If the Saugeen Ojibway people truly wanted to improve relations, respect and trust with the sport fishing community and related benefactors and local municipalities, then they should look at this approach and declare these waters off limits to commercial fishers from both bands, restricting their commercial fishing efforts to the outer waters described in previous fishing agreements. There is established precedent by a First Nations community in northern Ontario, to their credit, which has already taken a proactive, very positive step to eliminating conflict and damage to the sport fishery by declaring specific waters off limits to their commercial fishers. Kudos to that native community for such forward, conservation minded thinking. Could the SON not follow this northern Ontario band's lead?

How ironic is it that in their April 9, 2013, press release Chief Lee and Chief Kahgee say "these waters are sacred to us." If the waters of Owen Sound and Colpoys Bay are truly "sacred" then sit down with MNR and other stakeholders and renegotiate a new fishing agreement

which allows for the fair sharing of the fisheries resource, outside of the confined, sensitive waters of both bays. MPP Bill Walker has already called for repealing the current agreement and has a petition circulating to that effect. This offers a perfect opportunity to an amended fishing agreement with a negotiating process that is open to transparency and public dialogue.

On a broader note, the MNR-SON fishing agreement also pertains to waters spanning from central Lake Huron north to the Bruce Peninsula and down the southwestern Georgian Bay coast to Nottawasaga Bay. There was no public consultation by MNR-SON, despite previous promises to do so by MNR, with the shoreline communities, outdoor clubs and the tourist business sector, on suggestions for protecting sport fish and sport fishing, while at the same time, enabling a viable SON commercial fishery.

We remind MNR and SON about the front page headline in the Oct. 29, 2008, Sun Times, "Sportsmen get voice in next fish talks." The Hon. Donna Cansfield, MNR minister at the time, made it quite clear in The Sun Times article that talks would be public. "I did make a commitment . . . that when the the agreements come up in the

future, there would be some really good conversations that goes on and that their views (the Bruce Peninsula Sportsmen) would be heard and respected." Minister Cansfield went on to say "I say to them (the sportsmen), it's not about them, it's not about the First Nations — it's about the fish. The sustainability of that fish and that fish population is my responsibility as the minister of natural resources. How do we get as much input as possible from everyone who has a role to play from the scientists and the biologists to the recreational fishing folks and the First Nations? It should be a very good conversation with everyone."

All area outdoor clubs, municipal officials, sport fishermen, the business community and the chiefs of both the Saugeen and Cape Croker communities, by way of this announcement, are invited to attend. MP Larry Miller and MPP Bill Walker have confirmed their participation. Let's have some constructive fisheries management dialogue, Saturday, April 27, 9 a.m. at the Hepworth-Shallow Lake legion.

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