

With rights comes responsibility



**CATHY ABRAMSON,
DIRECTOR, UNIT I**

Our tribal fisheries have been an intense topic of discussion for a while now. We should all be concerned about this issue because, ultimately, it could affect our entire tribe. Our past leaders fought hard to secure the right to manage our own fisheries. This board needs to work hard to continue to keep that right!

In October, CORA (made up of five Michigan tribes) issued an emergency order closing all of northern Lake Michigan to tribal commercial fishing. As a result, those fishermen affected have been attending our meetings and giving their input. A resolution to help give monies to those fishermen affected has been brought before the board. I did not support this because it included giving money to the captains who have been a part of the problem that caused the Lake Michigan closure.

Several years ago, we gave substantial dollars to the captains to help out their operations. We thought they would give money to their helpers. In most cases, the captains kept all the money. While I feel bad for those fishermen helpers who need help, I have not heard how any of their captains (their employers) have helped them out through this difficult three weeks. We don't even do that for our own tribal employ-

ees who have been laid off.

Management of the Great Lakes subsistence and commercial fisheries is extremely complex. There is often a desire to try to reduce these complex management issues down to a single cause and effect explanation. Unfortunately, this results in proposed solutions that are inadequate and misguided. As a board member, I take full responsibility for the decision to make changes to the co-captain's license. We need to change it back to what it was originally intended for in 2008.

While I take responsibility for this, there are a few tribal fishermen who also need to take responsibility for their own irresponsible actions that helped bring us to this point. Their fishing rights do not give them the right to manipulate and violate our laws. Many of our fishermen are fearful to say anything because there is only one fish buyer who may or may not buy their fish and they are at his mercy. This is truly not our way. Our board has to correct this.

Because we are the policymakers, my fellow board members and I must take the time to work with the Great Lakes Fishing Committee and have in depth, frank discussions regarding the management of the fisheries once and for all. Our Natural Resource staff works very hard to explain fisheries management issues at the monthly conservation committee meetings. Because most board members do not participate at these meetings (me included), we do not hear that analysis.

The Great Lakes fisheries are dynamic. Our tribal board needs to consider realistic expectations for the tribe's fishery in light of the aforementioned complicated management context. Our tribe cannot simply ignore the multi-

ple allocation agreements, restoration agreements and changing harvest pressures on the fishery. The reality is the fishery is based on a natural resource that is not unlimited. To date, our tribe has not had a real discussion about what the resource can support and what a reasonable allocation between tribes looks like. These are real and difficult issues that cannot be dealt with during crisis moments, such as the current time. The tribe cannot simply kick these questions down the road. It will result in ineffective negotiating positions in the 2020 consent decree process. 2020 will be here before we know it!

Some very important questions our tribe needs to answer are: Is the tribe managing the fishery from a business model? In other words, should the management goal be to support a small number of substantial fishing operations and limiting the number of operations? Is the tribe managing the commercial fishery as a treaty right accessed by as many people as possible, realizing this means fewer people will actually make a living at commercial fishing? These two goals are mutually exclusive. Most importantly, this will take time and cannot happen when trying to manage the fisheries in crisis like the current closure situation.

I propose we set aside the time and commit ourselves to adequate planning sessions on at least a biweekly basis. These workshops should be full days with full board attendance.

I hope I piqued your interest! Like I said, 2020 is coming soon. Will we be properly prepared? I hope so.

If you have any questions or comments, please contact me at (906) 322-3823 or email me at wcabramson@saulttribe.net.