

People of the Sturgeon: Wisconsin's Love Affair with an Ancient Fish

Don Reiter Oral History

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Interviewer: KSK – Kathleen Schmitt Klein

Transcriber: NCC

Kathleen Schmitt Klein: All right. So, today is Monday, August 26, 2008. I'm talking with Don Reiter who is a tribal –

Don Reiter: Fish and Wildlife manager.

KSK: – Fish and Wildlife manager for the Menominee Indian Tribe of Wisconsin.

DR: Yes.

KSK: All right. [laughter] Don, I just want to start with just a little background information. How long have you been in your current position working with the tribe?

DR: Well, my current position with the tribe started back in 1991. The tribe came up with a fish and wildlife managing position, and since then I've been working.

KSK: And when did you start working at the sturgeon?

DR: Well, it all started way back in 1993, where tribal state and federal biologists came together. It was something where we had some tribal elders come before the Management Board of our Fish and Wildlife Management and asked us if they could actually go down and spear lake sturgeon. And we told them no, not at this time. So, then it all actually started back in 1993.

KSK: So, you know, that incident happened, and there's a lot of talk between different agencies. Finally, what happened then was lake sturgeon planned and developed for the tribe. Can you talk a little bit about that?

DR: Yeah, it all started back in 1993. But in 1994, like I said, we had federal, state, and tribal biologists all came together for initial talks. It was hard at first, because you get to get everybody to the table. It seemed like it was a long time coming. But then when we did get everybody together, and everybody came. Actually, we poured through the plan, came up with a plan pretty quick. Then I think we've finalized the plan in 1995. But before that, we've had to meet. There were several meetings we had to do within Northeast Wisconsin, all along through, Wolf River, all the way to Lake Winnebago, meet with different citizens groups, as well as tribal people.

KSK: Oh, I didn't know about that. Can you talk a little bit about those meetings? What was discussed in those meetings?

DR: Well, first of all, once our Menominee Lakes Region Management Committee came up with the plan itself to be reviewed, once we put together a writing copy, we had to set forth several meetings because the plan itself had to be accepted by the tribal people first, and they accepted that. So, then after they accepted it, we had to meet with like, Lake Sturgeons for Tomorrow. other citizens group. I can't remind what the groups were.

KSK: Shadows on the Wolf.

DR: Shadows on the Wolf. We even met with some people in Green Bay. That meetings we just discussed what was going on, what our restoration plan entailed and just the logistics of the whole plan itself. We just met and discussed. Once they got on board, the plan itself signed itself and pushed forward.

KSK: So, the restoration plan, what does it entail? What are the different parts of it?

DR: There's like three different aspects to the plan itself. One is, look and see. Because in a Menominee culture, the Keshena Falls was one of the original spawning areas for the lake sturgeon. We wanted to look at our historical preservation, and our elders came through and wanted to have a location that people could come and see lake sturgeon again. That was one of the gives and takes through our meetings with the state and the citizens group that, "Okay. We could get the fish over the dam 20 fish per year but there would be a look and see, sort of." Wolf River has separate regulations where the fish are protected. So, the fish that are protected on Wolf River they're not harvestable. So, in the spring, we have wardens watching the river and checking our spear fishermen, since we know there's lake sturgeons at one of the falls. So, the look and see method is basically for tribal members could watch them spawn at their original known spot was Keshena Falls. So, that's one important aspect. The other aspect is our put, grow and take fishery we have on Legend Lake. It's a fishery, again, agreed on by the federal state and tribal biologists that we could put the Lake Winnebago strain of lake sturgeon into and watch them grow. We actually started in 1994, putting fish in the Legend Lake, and that's going to be a harvestable population for the tribal members.

KSK: You actually had a spearing season that opened a few years ago?

DR: Actually, due to the success of the fish in the Lake Sturgeon population assessments all through October, we found out now we have a harvestable population. That started in 2005. But now, the season has been open since 2005, but our next thing is to get tribal members to harvest the fish.

KSK: So, how has that been going?

DR: I guess it's more falls on me because it's got to be an educational aspect. We're going to be trying to do a couple of new educational seminars on how to catch fish, and just to get people more interested in capturing lake sturgeon.

KSK: I've been doing some research on the Menominee tribe. It does seem like from what I've been reading that ice spearing tradition probably was kind of lost because once the Menominee tribe came here on the reservation, there really wasn't, I mean, there wasn't any lake sturgeon up here to that ice harvesting. That was mostly down in Green Bay and down on Lake Winnebago when the tribe wasn't just combined. So, that will be an educational process then.

DR: Yes, that will be. I still think it's going to be well rewarding once we do get the first lake sturgeon harvested but we're getting close.

KSK: So, are there still any spears around? Do any elders remember that or is that pretty much

kind of been quieted down?

DR: There is a spear fishing season but it's on other fish species.

KSK: Okay.

DR: The spears that they use for the other fish would not be used for lake sturgeon.

KSK: Much smaller.

DR: Yes.

KSK: Yes.

DR: There's not really a talk right now from the elders on our lake sturgeon spearing that occurred way back when.

KSK: Right. Okay. Well, we're standing here at the base of Sullivan Falls. I was wondering if you could just talk a little bit about – you were kind of talking previously before I got this – about what you've noticed about the adult sturgeon that you've stocked here or placed here before.

DR: In our original plan [19]94 through [19]97, we use Keshena Falls as the stocking place for the annual adult harvest or adult transfer. That worked to some extent. But we did start losing fish every spring due to ice (percolation?) and they push the fish to (Balsam Road?) and go through (Balsam Dam?). But then we moved and our second location was Big Eddy Falls, which is five miles north of Keshena. With some success, we realized that we had Big Eddy and down, we had pretty much a population about fifteen to seventeen fish that would stay year in and year out at Big Eddy until the spring. Then we get an influx of fish moving down. So, then our third area for stocking adult transfers was Sullivan Falls. We've been doing this since 1998, 2000. We've been finding out that we can keep lake sturgeon longer as again, we just transferred them to Sullivan Falls. We do all our surgeries. We do the surgeries, implantations of internal CSAIL transmitters right here at the falls. So, we've been noticing we had trouble when we used to do the surgery down by Keshena Falls and then move them up. The loss rate of the transmitters was over 50 percent. So, now we install the transmitters up here and they hold their transmitters, pretty much 100 percent.

KSK: They have different kinds of seasonal movements; they're doing different things in the spring than they are in the fall?

DR: Yes. Through radio telemetry work we've done on the Wolf River, we found out that yes, they do move. During the summers, they find the large holes along the Wolf Rivers, let's say Smokey Falls, the Wolf River Dells, Upper and Lower Dells. There's fish located at a couple of locations in between the falls themselves. Then you get all the way down to Big Eddy. There's some fish now located at Keshena Falls. The object is we we're monitoring habitats, the critical habitats they're using. We're also going to be monitoring or doing some project on the amount of

spawning areas on the Wolf River.

KSK: How do you feel about working with this fish? I mean, you weren't working on lake sturgeon before, and suddenly, it was like kind of a remarkable fish to be working with. How do you feel about it with its history with the tribe?

DR: I think from a cultural standpoint, again, it's really self-rewarding having the tribal elders. Because most of our managers done by what the tribal elders stated would happen in the past. What Menominee Fish and Wildlife Management is we got to take the biological standpoint, and also with the culture. So, instead of just the biological monitoring, we have a cultural aspect we got to put in our management. So, it's really, for me, it's really been self-rewarding working with the elders, and also working with this fish. Because as you know, the fish have never been here. So, it's something to find out – it's baby steps to seeing what they actually use. It's just from day one, I got a full record of what this fish will do and it's just something to know.

KSK: I have some papers to give you. In some of the research that I've been doing, I've found records. I was wondering if you've heard anything about this or seen anything before. But I found records that actually the Menominee tribe requested from the Conservation Commission before it was the DNR to get changed over sixty-seven or something. So, the Conservation Commission, Menominee tribe elders actually requested sturgeon to be stocked on the reservation as far back as the 1930s. Do you know anything about that?

DR: No, I don't.

KSK: I was just curious.

DR: Yes.

KSK: I'm going to ask (Dave Reno?) to see if he has any input.

DR: Yes. He'd be the one to ask.

KSK: Yes. All right. Well, is there anything else you want to add?

DR: Funny but I was thinking about some of the adults.

KSK: I really liked it when I was here with you before. I took some photos of you releasing the fish and it was just really neat. You kind of held their tails and waited for them to kind of just swim off. It was a pretty neat thing to see.

DR: Oh, I guess that's it.

KSK: Okay. All right.

[end of transcript]