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### Re-Spooling the Mind of an Angler

On a warm August evening, my dad and I set out in search of Moby Dick. Not the white whale from Herman Melville's epic classic but a thirty-five pound muskellunge that was lurking in the Chippewa Flowage of northern Wisconsin. With our hooks freshly sharpened, we motored to the edge of a weed bar and slowly drifted in. The skeptic in me refused to believe we would see anything. After all, the last time anyone hooked into this musky was almost two years ago. Despite this, my father and I casted our baits out like machines and nothing hit. Legend says that the musky is the fish of 10,000 casts and Moby Dick proved to be no different. After an hour of fishing, my dad and I began to joke around about how if we "smelled land where there was no land" then we knew we were close to finding this elusive creature. In the middle of our playful bantering, I suddenly saw my dad's lure explode out of the water. I screamed and ducked as the bait – hooks and all – went flying at my head.

After the excitement was over, my dad said that even though the fish he had up was heavy, it was not Moby Dick. I was disappointed but also relieved. If my dad or I were to catch a musky of that size, we would have ended its life in order to bring a brief moment of excitement into ours. That is the unspoken rule of the angler, to show off his or her catch to a crowd of people in a triumphant manner. Nature, however, is not that greedy. She kills neither in excess nor for sport. Why is it then that humans, who originally came from Nature, now abuse its resources?

When the tribes on the Great Plains hunted buffalo, they let nothing from the animal go to waste. Once white settlers began moving west, however, things began to change. The settlers began massacring millions of buffalo in only a year. What were they going to do with the animal? They did not utilize the meat or the hide – they had cattle for that – and they did not need to utilize the animal’s bones because their iron tools worked much better. White men purposely killed the buffalo in order to starve the Native Americans who depended on them for food. The white settlers used Nature as a tool of oppression instead of as a tool for survival. Not only impractical but also incredibly immoral, this environmental genocide greatly affected those who lived in harmony with the land.

The creation of the Chippewa Flowage – my homeland – was also a result of the white settlers’ apathetic attitude towards the Native American belief in conservation. As county historian, my father has done research on the history of the flowage and the birth of our resort. According to my father, the resort my family owns was established by an Ojibwa Indian named Chiz-ui-aw. He built a sixteen-by-twenty foot, one-room log cabin on the shores of Pokagama Lake. While living there – until his death in 1922 – he witnessed land around him began to change drastically. In 1920, the logging industry stripped the land of its trees. Everything was clear-cut and sold at the trading post a few miles away. Once the lumberjacks had all the trees they needed, they left the trading post and the land they desecrated behind them. Then in 1923, white settlers built a dam on the Chippewa River, which led to the creation of the Chippewa Flowage. But, the construction of the Flowage came at a great price. The creation of the dam caused the Chippewa River to flood not only the tribe’s trading post but also the homes and settlements of the Ojibwa tribe. Thankfully, Chiz-ui-aw passed away before he was able to see his beloved homeland get flooded but his descendants had to witness the transformation of their

homeland into an angler's paradise. Although the white settlers destroyed the land in the 1920s, Nature has reclaimed it for herself again. Second growth forest healed the damage that the clear cutting had done and the Ojibwa tribe reclaimed the land they had lost. They now work collaboratively with the Department of Natural Resources – and the local youth – to ensure that the land will be around for future generations.

Even though the Ojibwa attitude about their relationship to the natural world began to change my thinking, it was not until I actively participated in the restoration of a local lake that I saw the tribe's values translate into something tangible. In my environmental research class as a senior in high school, I had the opportunity to work on a project with the Lac Court Oreilles tribe that tried to eradicate Eurasian Milfoil from the local lakes. We drove out to Smith Lake and learned how to tell the difference between Eurasian Milfoil and the common weed. With my shovel, gloves, and knee-high boots in tow, I worked with ten other students for almost two hours, digging out these invasive pests. The work was hard. The early April ground had not yet escaped winter's chilly grasp. The roots of the milfoil were stubborn and we were often required to take the sharper end of our shovel and repeatedly drive it through a neighboring plant's roots.

Once we were finished at the lake, we drove back to the tribal headquarters and began putting the freshly harvested milfoil into flowerpots. The goal was to introduce bugs called weevils that would consume the entire milfoil plant. With a surplus of food, the weevils would breed thus creating extra beetles, which are introduced into a lake that has a milfoil problem. In order to complete this task, the tribe had a makeshift greenhouse constructed nearby and divided my entire class up into teams. I was in charge of filling the potted milfoil with fresh black dirt. It was here that I finally understood what the tribe was trying to do. While I was filling the pots with soil, I was able to feel the dirt in my hands. This dirt was something tangible. It was no

longer an abstract idea or value. I smelled the decomposed matter that made up the dirt. I felt the coolness in my hands and felt the sublime feeling as the soil ran between my fingers. I realized that the field trip I was on took the beliefs of the Ojibwa tribe and put them into action – through us. My class and I were using a predator-prey dynamic in order to eliminate an invasive species. We did not use any pesticides or poisons to kill the milfoil. We were using Nature's own design to fight a threat towards Nature.

Even though the Ojibwa culture has a greater influence on me than the white culture, I sometimes find myself falling into the destructive habit that my German-born ancestors carried over. As an angler, I have obeyed that unspoken rule. I have kept more fish than what I really needed. Granted, I did not go over my daily limit but I did go over Nature's limit. Some of the fish I filleted were wasted. Either their bodies were too small to clean and I threw them into the gutbucket half mangled or I threw away the remains of their fillets when they sat un-eaten in the fridge for weeks at a time. This may seem trivial to some people. After all, what difference could two or three fish make? To those fish, our attitude about wastefulness is what decides whether they should live or die. It is the attitude behind wasting these fish that influences everything we do. If people – not only anglers – treated Nature with the same kind of respect that the Native Americans have, then our planet's natural resources would not be on the verge of becoming nonexistent.

I do not consider myself a wasteful person. I try to take the Ojibwa's respect for nature and apply it to everything I do. However, there are some times when I find myself acting more like the white settlers by disregarding the importance of sustaining the earth's resources. It just shows that I have much more to learn from the Native American culture. I have cast aside the old, frayed thinking of the white society and adopted the sleek, strong thinking of the Ojibwa

people. Their beliefs have changed my views of the natural world. Moreover, if I ever were to catch Moby Dick, I have decided that, aside from taking a few snapshots, I would release him back into the flowage. After all, a picture lasts a lifetime but a dead fish is only good for a few hours.