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# Ice opens up Apostle Islands fishery

## *Red Cliff brothers, son continue legacy*

*By Charlie Otto Rasmussen  
Staff Writer*

**Red Cliff, Wis.**—On the far side of Oak Island in the Apostle Islands archipelago, birds and wildlife remain undercover as the sun struggles on the eastern horizon. The air temperature is 16 degrees below zero. Arctic northwest winds whip across the Gichigami ice, further magnifying the brutal cold as the land seems all but paralyzed.

“Kind of chilly today,” says barehanded Sean Hanson as he pulls a gillnet through a freshly chopped hole in the ice. A string of whitefish emerge, many with bulging bellies filled with air from their sudden 180 foot ascension to the surface of Lake Superior. With remarkable dexterity, Hanson removes a small pin clenched between his front teeth and pops each fish, producing a thin whistle.

“They come out of the net a lot easier once you get the air out,” he explains as his blushed hands free a silvery whitefish, tossing it a few feet to brother Jamie who stuns it with a quick head-whack and has it gutted in seconds. Hanson, a fifth generation Gichigami commercial fisherman, heads a four-man ice netting operation rounded out by another brother, Troy, and son, Sean Jr. Grandfather Wilfred Peterson passed on the business—Peterson’s Fisheries—to Hanson in 1995.

On this mid-February morning, Hanson’s crew works atop a foot-thick expanse of ice between Oak and Manitou Islands. With ten gillnets measuring 300 feet long by 6 feet high to pull, pick and reset, the fishermen work in smooth unison, each man filling a role in the progression.

The first lift of the morning is a good one, yielding about 200 pounds of whitefish, three lean lake trout, a siscowet and one foot-long herring. Sean Jr. threads a red plastic tag through the gills of each laker—a species whose harvest is tightly regulated by state and tribal fisheries managers. Each fisherman receives a limited allocation of these individually numbered tags based on harvest quotas designed to maintain lake trout populations at current levels.

While a few different fish species invariably show up in 3,000 feet of net, the harvest is far-and-away comprised of the Friday night menu classic: whitefish. Hanson’s crew receive about \$1.25 per pound from a local wholesaler that distributes the dressed whitefish to area restaurants, grocery stores and markets. This spring Hanson reopens his own market along Highway 13 just south of Red Cliff following a



*The Hansons of Red Cliff-based Peterson’s Fisheries raise a gillnet loaded with whitefish from approximately 180 feet below the ice. From foreground: Sean Jr., Troy, Sean Sr. and Jamie Hanson. (Photo by Charlie Otto Rasmussen.)*



*Near the north shore of Oak Island, Sean Hanson plucks a whitefish from a net drawn through a freshly chopped hole in the ice. Boxes of whitefish (foreground) are loaded onto sleds and hauled by snowmobile from sites around the Apostle Islands to the Wisconsin mainland at Red Cliff. (COR)*

mid-winter hiatus. Beginning with weekend-only business hours, Peterson’s Fisheries market expands to 10-6 pm daily in May as more vacationers and second home owners return to the area. The change of season also signals the return to tug boat fishing for Hanson and other commercial fishermen.

“Once the ice starts breaking up, we head out to open water to fish with trap nets. We’re kind of all-around fishermen,” Hanson said.

The under-ice gillnetting efforts of Hanson and three other tribal operators are monitored by Red Cliff fisheries staff who make intermittent appearances during net lifts to count each fish and collect biological data. Red Cliff Biologist Matt Symbal said information gathered by resource technicians is a key element in establishing harvest guidelines for the fishery. Along with the Bad River Band, Red Cliff officials manage the Wisconsin Gichigami fishery through intergovernmental agreements with the Department of Natural Resources. In April 2007 tribal and state representatives signed a new 10-year management pact—the fourth Lake Superior fishing agreement between the parties since 1981.