

John Olson

I am a story teller and I work with wildlife. There are a lot of stories here today and there will be more tomorrow. That's what all of this is about, an oral history. The story I have is not funny. And it's not long. It's just a story that came to mind when I was asked to participate in this discussion. It might describe kind of where this 25-year celebration started and where the 25 years have taken us.

Back when I was much younger I worked in a real world of applied wildlife management, out of the Ashland and Iron County office in Mercer. We wanted to improve our working relationship with others, so we had an idea. Through the cooperation of Larry Baker, an Alaska native working at the Forest Service in Glidden, we began with what we would affectionately call the annual Love In. We would get together in the basement of the Glidden Forest Service Office to share our management practices. It was well received and, short of three years, that basement was jam packed.

Well, it was 1984 or 1985 and a new concept and a new biologist were amongst us. It was treaty rights and he was Jonathan Gilbert. The invitation went out and this new kid eagerly accepted. Let me set the stage. Here we're in the cold cement basement of a federal Forest Service building. The building is packed. There's at least 50 people in there, mainly white males. They were all there to talk about how great we're doing projects and everything. And when it was time for Jonathan to speak, Jonathan stood up in a corner of the room and began a short description of his job and the need for the Chippewa tribe to exercise their legal rights.

As he spoke you could feel the electricity start to build. The sensitivity in the room began to increase. Everybody got quiet. Even Larry Baker, who's in the back stirring this roaster of venison barbecue, stopped stirring. If a pin would have hit the floor, it would have made a tremendous sound. It was extremely sensitive because here we were listening to a person who's telling us about treaty rights and how they're going to unfold. The air was electrified with disbelief. Even the late environmentalist Martin Hanson had nothing to say and that didn't happen very often. Later over a barbecue lunch I heard folks mumbling, "It's just a bad dream, it will go away."

Treaty rights and Jonathan Gilbert did not go away. They stayed and they're here today. Why did this group of reasonable, well-educated folks in the basement of a federal building react in such a manner? Why didn't they discuss? Why wouldn't they ask questions? I think it's because they didn't know how this was going to affect them. How it was going to change what they do and who they do it for. No one had an answer as to how things were going to unfold and for this reason there was total silence. It was fear of the unknown. No one knew how this was going to unfold in our management programs.

If this scenario would have happened today in the basement of Glidden Forest Service Office, would it be the same? I think not. I think there would be lots of questions and there would be lots of dialogue. As a field biologist during the 1980s and then as a person involved in public forests and treaty wildlife and wild rice and furbearers the next two decades, I made a few very profound observations and my white hair allows me to make these observations. Number one: GLIFWC did not go away. Number two: Jonathan Gilbert did not go away, and Number three and probably most important: treaty rights did not go away.

What's changed those 25 years? I think the professional level of GLIFWC staff has given them credibility, has given the treaty rights credibility, and in countless events it's given the

DNR's role and protection management greater credibility. It used to be that maximum opportunity was our most sought-after mission. We're still concerned about opportunity, but only in balancing the need to protect these resources into the future.

Have treaty rights negatively affected wildlife resources that live or move through the ceded territories of northern Wisconsin? No, they have not. The traditional and protected harvest of terrestrial wildlife has mostly been common to all hunters and trappers whether native or non-native. It normally occurs by individual hunters or trappers scattered across the millions of acres of our public forest or our wetlands. Because registration and accountability that Jonathan talked about occurs and because it's similar to state managed seasons, results can be reviewed and compared easily.

Have treaty rights affected how we do our work? I think definitely for some folks and for some species. Through communications developed around federal recommendations, we've been able to discuss and agree on specific harvest quotas, review and accept tribal declarations and share limited resources relatively well. It's taken time to work out the best procedures, but with a commitment to make these work and with this commitment coming from the state, the tribes, the various federal agencies and the GLIFWC staff, we now have protocols that seem to work well. Will there be challenges? Will there be furrowed eyebrows, measured speech and disagreements? You bet, probably from our combined concern about these resources we both value and share.

I guess one little final note: GLIFWC wildlife staff led by Jonathan Gilbert and Peter David have done a remarkable job over the years. Sometimes the hardest work occurs at a table in a cold government building someplace in central Wisconsin. Whether it's a wildlife committee such as furbearers or wolves or deer or bear, or the wild rice committee, GLIFWC staff have been active participants in management, and most times they've been leaders in working toward a reasonable approach. I think the professional level of GLIFWC staff has made science-based management that much more important and has become an important component of our world today. So, happy birthday.