

WALK ON THE WILDSIDE

The Minnesota Conservation Federation

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Ice spearing holds long tradition in Minnesota

Seeing people throw spears at fish through holes in the ice may sound like something out of a primitive time, but each winter, thousands of Minnesota anglers follow a tradition inherited from Native American's, called spear fishing.

The anglers sit in dark houses, like an ice house, along the edge of a large, rectangular hole. They watch for fish to come into view, then throw their spear, which looks like a large fork, at the fish.

There are only a few species of fish open to darkhouse spearing. They include the northern pike, whitefish, catfish and rough fish like carp or suckers.

Most Minnesotans who spear fish go after northern pike.

In order to attract fish toward their hole, spear fishermen and women use decoys, which look like big fishing lures without hooks. They dangle the decoys in the water and move them around to catch the attention of fish.

Some spear anglers carve their own decoys out of wood, which is another ancient tradition inherited



from Native Americans, which goes back thousands of years.

Tough Going

One might think it would be easy to spear a fish, but it takes a lot of practice and even the best spear anglers do not take as many fish as someone who is ice fishing. However, spear anglers tend to take larger fish on average, then people who are ice fishing.

Problems

Although ice spearing is a long tradition that dates back thousands of years, some anglers do not think that ice spearing should be legal, because they think that spear anglers take too many big fish and they cannot release fish.

They also worry that spear anglers will kill muskies, because it can be difficult to tell the difference between a northern pike and a muskie in the water.

However, according to the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, spear fishing does not have a negative effect on fish populations. The DNR

also provides information to those who spear through the ice to help them better identify muskies and northern pike when they are spearing.

If someone wants to learn how to spear fish through the ice, the best advice is to go with someone who is experienced in ice spearing. That way they can learn how to attract fish, throw the spear and identify different species of fish in the water.

Northern Spearing

Although ice spearing is practiced statewide, it has a larger following in the northern portion of the state, in areas like Cass Lake,

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Ice Litter

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Minnesota's frozen lakes attract thousands of people each winter, but many leave unwanted waste.
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Each winter thousands of Minnesota residents are attracted to our frozen lakes for recreation. Many fish, snowmobile and cross country ski. Unfortunately, some of those who use our lakes in winter leave behind litter, which can cause numerous problems for wildlife and the environment.

Tons of cans, bottles, food wrappers, fishing line, batteries, tires and other items are left on the ice each winter by careless people. When the ice melts in the spring, that trash either washes ashore or sinks to the bottom of the lake or river.

One of the most dangerous for wildlife is fishing line. Birds, fish and animals can become entangled in the line and die. It is important to take any unwanted fishing line home with you to dispose of properly in the trash.

Used batteries are often discarded on the ice and can contribute to significant health problem in our lakes. Batteries contain mercury, which is already at high levels

in many of Minnesota's lakes. Mercury can make fish and wildlife ill. It can also cause health problems in humans who eat fish contaminated with mercury.

Another problem source of pollution is gasoline and oil. Both are toxic to fish and wildlife and lead to illness and death. Oil or gasoline carelessly dumped or leaked on the ice goes right into the lake, causing significant pollution problems.

Cans and bottles may not threaten fish and wildlife directly, but they are unsightly when left to fall to the bottom of the lake. Broken glass and the sharp edges of torn aluminum cans can wash ashore and threaten barefoot swimmers in the summer.

Some Minnesota anglers even go so far as to leave their wooden ice houses on the lake. Often they are burned, or if ice conditions are

poor, allowed to sink into the lake. The pollution caused by the remains of ice houses is both unsightly and dangerous. This practice is illegal, and anyone caught doing it faces a stiff fine from the state Department of Natural Resources, but each year a few anglers still do it. Some even get away with it.

Minnesota has long had a reputation for clean lakes and rivers, but that reputation is changing thanks to pollution. Numerous sources of pollution are making our waters unhealthy and our fish unhealthy to eat. It can also affect the many other forms of wildlife that use our lakes. Each of us has to do our part to keep Minnesota's waters clean. If you see trash on the ice, pick it up and dispose of it properly. If you witness littering, notify the authorities.



These are a few pieces of the litter that can be found in the spring as a result of careless littering on the ice.

White pines are making a comeback

During the winter in Minnesota, most trees are gray and bare. The exception is the evergreen, which as its name suggests, stays green all winter long.

One of Minnesota's most magnificent evergreens is the white pine tree. Giant white pines were once found across much of northern and eastern Minnesota, but almost all of them were cut down by the logging industry in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Amazingly, vast areas of white pine forest were leveled completely bare as loggers took every tree they could find.

The white pine is capable of living more than 200 years and growing to more than 100 feet tall. Few examples of very old white pines still remain in the state, but there are stands of extremely old



white pines in a few places in northern Minnesota.

Although much of the state's white pines forests were destroyed, white pines have been heavily replanted in many areas and are reclaiming their place in the forests. However it will take many years for the trees to resemble anything close to those that were cut down.

Many mammals depend on the white pine for food. Squirrels,

chipmunks and mice eat the seeds and soft needles. Birds such as pine siskins and crossbills also eat the seeds. Other creatures use the trees for protection from the cold during the winter.

The white pine is also a common nesting site for bald eagles, because the large trees are able to hold the weight of the enormous eagle nests.

For humans, the white pine needles can be steeped into a nutritious tea. Native Americans used the inner barks as an emergency food source.

Of course, white pines are also one of the most beautiful and impressive trees in the state and the return of the white pine forest would be a majestic sight for everyone who enjoys Minnesota's outdoor areas.

Wildlife uses the snow for protection from cold

When most of us think of snow, we think of cold, but for some birds and mammals, snow is the key to staying warm during the winter.

If you have ever built a snow cave in your backyard, you probably have noticed that the temperature inside the snow cave is warmer than the air outside. This happens because snow acts as insulation, like the material found inside the walls of your house. Some wildlife takes advantage of this



insulation to avoid the frigid cold of winter.

Ruffed grouse, for example,

cover themselves with snow when they sleep to insulate themselves from the cold. It also helps them hide from predators.

Snowshoe hares hunker down in indentations in the snow when they sleep, to help keep them warm during winter's frigid temperatures.

Voles dig a network of tunnels in the snow to help protect them from the cold and to avoid predators.

Little snow fleas don't mind the winter

During the winter, one of the last things you may expect to see outdoors is an insect, but not all of Minnesota's insects disappear during the winter.

Some insects are active in winter, despite the cold and snow. One such insect is the snow flea. These fleas are not pests like the fleas you might find on a dog or cat, but rather small black bugs



known as springtails that feed on decaying plant material.

On sunny, relatively warm winter days, the snow fleas become

active. They are often seen in large numbers jumping from place to place on the snow.

When temperatures are frigid, the snow fleas are inactive, but slight warm-ups bring them out from their resting places in the soil to look for food. A protein produced by the insects, which acts like anti-freeze, protects them from the cold.

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Bemidji and Grand Rapids. For many people, it is a family tradition that is passed down from one generation to the next.

Ice spearing has also grown in popularity in the Twin Cities in recent years.

Unfortunately, in the long term, the state has seen a slow decrease in the number of people who spear fish statewide, but there remains a steady population who still enjoy it.

In neighboring Wisconsin, ice spearing also holds a long tradi-

tion, but one of the most popular fish for Wisconsin ice spearing is the lake sturgeon. Lake Sturgeon are found in Minnesota, but it is not legal to spear them.

Decoys

One of the most popular aspects of ice spearing are the decoys that people use to attract fish. Antique decoys are worth a lot of money and many artists have found a market for ice decoys that they carve. Even people who do not spear for fish have fun collecting decoys or using them for decorations in their homes.

Rules

Only Minnesotans can ice spear in Minnesota, which is different from regular fishing, where people from other states can travel here and fish in our lakes and rivers.

Some lakes are closed to ice spearing, especially those that are designated muskie lakes. This and other important rules about ice spearing are available in the Minnesota Fishing Regulations booklet, which is available free from the DNR.

Learn more about the Minnesota Conservation Federation...

Dedicated to hunters, anglers and others who value our natural resources!

Visit our website at www.mncf.org

...or contact our office at 651-690-3077

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