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Camp owners ponder houseboat invasion of Lake of the Woods

Fort Frances Times

FORT FRANCES, ONT.--"I refuse to believe that you can't get enough brains together on both sides of the border to run the border lakes as they should be run."

Ed Betts of Nestor Falls, secretary of the newly-renamed Northwestern Ontario Tourism Association, was hitting out at houseboat operations on Lake of the Woods with this remark Saturday, November 12, at the camp owners' fall membership meeting in Knights of Columbus Hall. Around 30 operators and government officials attended.

Conducted by President Les Helliar of Nestor Falls, the meeting also discussed rough fish and commercial fishermen, international bridge tolls and contentious Alneau Peninsula regulations. It learned there will be no return to the May 15 walleye season opening next year, the date having been fixed as the third Saturday in May.

William H. Charlton, assistant deputy minister of the New Ontario Ministry of Northern Affairs, was introduced at the meeting and spoke to the evening banquet.

Mr. Betts, a former American businessman, spoke up on old experiences with invaders, in this case Russian fishing trawlers on the Atlantic coast, in commenting on the growing numbers of houseboat operations in boundary lakes. The Russian invasion of territorial waters was solved by imposing a 200-mile limit recently but the problem had persisted since the 1930's he said.

"But we can't wait 40 years (to settle the houseboat problem)," he declared "They will have destroyed it (the lake) by then."

Laurie Catherall of the Ontario Ministry of Industry and Tourism reported that houseboats do not require tourist operators' license and are subject only to regulations of the Ministry of Environment concerning sewage disposal. "I don't really see what you can do about it," he pointed out because cottage regulations are "too unwieldy" to apply to houseboats.

"If you want to buy a boat and plunk it in, go ahead," Kendal Hanson, a veteran operator, suggested. "The houseboat contravenes land use permits and gives us just another problem coming on."

Mr. Betts said he foresaw 500 houseboats on Lake of the Woods becoming 1,500 and at that time, "forget it." "We are sending a five million dollar industry down the drain because we are not willing to face up to this problem."

"The tourist industry is the greatest economic opportunity to maintain the people of this area. We have to come up with a policy. It's disgraceful for us to go on if we don't really understand what we are trying to do. There has to be a master plan." Mr. Betts was cheered by the membership at this point.

While the houseboat issue was the hottest item of the afternoon's discussion, there was considerable thought given to disposal of rough fish and the role of the commercial fisherman. Regional Biologist Ken Chambers, member of a party of several Ministry of Natural Resources officials attending, took part in this discussion.

A resolution was passed to have the government conduct market research on rough fish, negotiate a support price for the product and set up quotas for commercial fishermen. Over-harvesting of pike and pickerel coupled with non-use of rough fish were the basic problems, members pointed out.

Woody Warren of Nestor Falls turned the talk onto the Alneau Peninsula of Lake of the Woods, an area that has been closed to regular hunting methods during a three-year trial period for hunting with primitive weapons.

"In the first year of the primitive hunting, there was a private club from Kenora using the area," Mr. Warren reported, "but now the hunters are coming from the West Coast and all over and we are not getting a penny's worth of revenue ... Either close the Alneau completely or open it to regular hunting again."

Mr. Warren saw the Alneau "causing extra pressure on what's left," with hunting resort operators forced to keep their guests in the Crow Lake area which has been "pressurized three times harder than before." The Alneau, he said, has never been over-harvested. He got support from Mr. Hanson who charged the government in closing the Alneau, "has taken a huge part of the assets of Northwestern Ontario and given them away. The Alneau has been taken off the market and put on the bargain counter."

Bill Halvorsen of Nestor Falls, past president, pointed out that the Alneau closing has left the Morson area hunters with "no place to go." He also reported on several resolutions passed at a recent meeting of Kenora camp operators.

Increased tolls at international bridge was seen as a "damn big problem" by several resorters who suggested sending their guests for next summer a complimentary ticket for the bridge. "The new rates are going to hurt like hell," one member noted.

Mr. Charlton said the government "has to be cognizant of their existence" in referring to commercial fishermen. He expressed hope that plans for processing rough fish "can generate a few dollars." He suggested that a quota for commercial fishing of pike and pickerel be imposed at the present level of catch in order that it does not escalate. He proposed a "compromise position" be taken with the net fishermen.

Another resolution passed by the operators for reference to the Northern Ontario Outfitters called for non-residents to be denied permission to catch and sell bait fish. In some cases, the visiting fishermen have been leaving their traps behind and also catching the fish during the spring reproduction period.

Mr. Helliar was appointed delegate, along with Vice-President Chuck Hanson, to attend the outfitters convention at Toronto.