



# ABA BULLETIN

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## **Concerns abound over Metis harvest pact**

### **Bob Scammell**

Thousands of Albertans are seriously questioning the Interim Metis Harvesting Agreements, and so far the only answers are the self-proclamations of special virtue we always hear from special interest groups who have been handed a plum that belongs to all of us.

How many times have we heard, apropos the grazing lease boondoggles: "trust us, we're good stewards; we're ranchers?"

Now Metis spokespersons are saying: "trust us, we're Metis, we won't abuse the resource."

Since we have been saddled with the Interim Metis Harvesting Agreements so close to our centennial year, perhaps we should recall that 100 years ago Alberta was scorched earth, most of its fish and wildlife rare, threatened and endangered from the rapacious market hunting by all homo saps., whites, aboriginals and, yes, Metis.

By the mid-1880s things were so bad that desperate measures, maybe even some laws, were called for.

So, in 1887 the Northwest Territories Law to Preserve Buffalo was passed, at least three years after the last buffalo was killed near Tail Creek along the Red Deer River. In 1888 they had to repeal that law because nobody liked it.

The Indians objected because the buffalo were the gifts of their gods, their Manitous. The Metis objected because they felt the law discriminated against them in favour of the Indians.

The white hunters were lawless, pure and simple.

Finally, in 1893, the Territories passed and did not repeal their first "Game Ordinance," and the 1903 version of that passed into Alberta law when we became a province.

Slightly more than 100 years later we are, as we always will be, stuck with the Indian hunting rights deal we made in return for the land and natural resources being transferred to Alberta by the federal government.

But after more than 100 years of compliance by the rest of us and most Metis with fish and wildlife protection laws, suddenly we exempt potentially more than 65,000 Metis.

The consequences have been immediate and frightening.

Horror stories abound of trophy bighorns, trophy mule deer, even cougars being taken out of season by Metis claiming to be hunting for food.

Few people hunt these creatures for subsistence, but Alberta Fish and Game Association officials really fear for them and especially for the moose populations, which almost all hunters favour for food.

But then, I suppose you can say you intend to eat anything.

That is what a couple of Metis recently said they were going to do with the under-legal-sized fish with which they were caught and charged.

Despite the fact they were not fishing for food, but participating in a fish for fun tournament, a Court of Queen's Bench Justice acquitted them.

What is really terrifying is that there is virtually no way of verifying the too-many stories that never get to court.

Even the new Minister of Sustainable Resource Development, Hon. David Coumts, admits his department does not have the resources to monitor the effects of the agreements or enforce compliance with it.

Vern McIntosh, AFGA Fish Committee chairman, reports Metis selling their commercial netting licenses back to the government, then walking down the hall to get free Metis netting licenses.

McIntosh says there is one Metis who holds 25 net licenses.

As of Feb. 17th McIntosh reported 196 Metis licenses and 330 nets on 68 Alberta lakes, in many of which the walleye populations are officially designated as "collapsed."

There are five Metis netting licenses on Pigeon Lake and 17 on Calling Lake, prime waters in the walleye recovery and enhancement program.

Clearly the Interim Metis Harvesting Agreements are too loose, too careless, particularly in the matter of who is Metis and whether they should ever be able to get things like netting licenses in waters where there are strict bag and size limits on the rest of us for conservation purposes.

One wonders why and how such an agreement was cobbled together in such haste and secrecy and why Hon. Pearl Calahasen, Minister of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development, calls the 15,000-member AFGA "a bunch of ---holes," as reported by a couple of its members who were only trying to express their concerns about the agreements.

Is that an expert opinion, or does the Hon. Pearl not know how many Metis are also AFGA members? Certainly thousands of concerned Albertans have noticed and will not forget that four of the total five signers of the agreements are Metis, including two for the Metis nations, and two of the three government signers, Ms. Calahasen herself and Hon. Mike Cardinal, then Minister of Sustainable Resource Development.

It is probably OK, but it looks and smells fishy.

But that one word "Interim" gives some hope that consultation, common sense, equity, and genuine concern for the resource can be worked into the final agreement.

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