

Local fishing

Community-based action for environmental justice

By Chelsea Chapman

Fishing season in Madison is just around the corner. Fishing is an elemental Wisconsin tradition and practiced by the state's oldest and newest residents. However, Madison's lakes and fish are not exempt from a global crisis of toxicity: every freshwater fish in a nationwide 2004 EPA study was contaminated with mercury and while a majority exceeded safe levels, some popular Wisconsin fish such as bass, walleye, largemouth bass, lake trout, and Northern pike had the highest average mercury concentrations. In a classic situation of environmental injustice, fish contamination poses a greater danger to low-income people, often of color, who are largely unrepresented in actions to publicize or alleviate the problem. Economic and cultural differences among the fishing public mean different ways of catching and eating fish. The lack of signs posted anywhere near local lakes, not to mention signs in Spanish or Hmong, means that many people are unaware of the problem. Ultimately, many of those for whom fish provides a substantial part of their diet are not only at higher risk of mercury contamination, but least likely to be aware of contamination danger.

Madison Environmental Justice Organization

Madison Environmental Justice Organization (MEJO) is one of several organizations addressing mercury contamination in the Yahara Watershed that includes Madison's lakes. It is a recently formed partnership of citizens working from the Kennedy Heights Community Center in Madison that aims to build the capacity of low-income and of color populations to address the problem of mercury pollution and inadequate risk assessment and education. Their work is not about changing behavior or placing the onus on individuals to stop fishing, but rather, on building community capacity to address the problem of mercury consumption at its roots — namely, industrial pollution in Madison.

MEJO participants Kazoua Moua and Maria Powell began their work by collecting fish stories. Through interviews and home visits, they realized that cultural differences in fishing might significantly contribute to heightening the risk of mercury toxicity. Large catfish, often prized by African American fishers, have spent several years at the bottom of Monona Bay and have absorbed more mercury and PCBs than other species. Hmong cooks often prefer whole fish, rather than the skinned fillets found at Woodmans. Their traditional recipes call for using all parts of the fish, but the



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head, skin, and organs also contain the highest levels of mercury. Traditional Hmong medicinal culture encourages pregnant women to eat fish, but here in Madison, mercury levels are high enough to potentially cause irreversible fetal brain damage. In addition to cultural differences, Kazoua and Maria discovered that many fishers and their families had never heard of mercury contamination, its sources, or of Department of Natural Resources' advisories that suggest limited fish consumption. MEJO found that although DNR had translated mercury advisories to Hmong and Spanish, they did not distribute them to the Hmong community, nor to African American and Latino subsistence anglers. Despite months of sustained pressure by MEJO, neither DNR nor any other agency has posted written or pictorial signage at popular shorefront fishing spots.

Why are the lakes polluted?

Power plants and other industrial polluters cause acid rain, sooty air pollution, and escalate global warming. In addition, agricultural run-off from Wisconsin farms flows into the Yahara Watershed. Right here in town, the University of Wisconsin's 50-year-old Charter Street power plant is the fifth largest producer of mercury pollution in Dane County. It stores coal in huge outdoor piles contained only by a chain link fence. On rainy days, runoff from the stored coal flows directly into Lake Monona. Because this plant belongs to the state-owned university, state agencies like DNR have made little effort to change it.

MEJO shares opposition to the coal-burning plant on the University campus with several local and national environmental organizations. Instead of focusing on the plant's negative impacts as global, distant, and numerically measurable, MEJO understands the power plant's pollution as immediate, local, and culturally detrimental to local subsistence anglers. Danger lies in the everyday practices of catching, cooking, and

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eating fish from Madison's lakes, not the scientifically assessed changes in planetary climate. But MEJO's ultimate goal, however, is to build the community's ability to respond to the source of mercury pollution with a powerful voice. By using local knowledge, they are forming quite explicit connections between their experiences and the hierarchical organizations that engage in global debate. Using cultural activism to foster organizational strength, MEJO sees fishing as the uniting bond between all Madison fishers. It is also the connection between those fighting both the immediately felt and the globally measured impact of industrial pollution. Local problems are global problems.

How to Learn More and Get Involved

To learn more at one of MEJO's "Let's Talk Fish" information meetings, please contact them at 240-1485 or www.mejo.us