

The Water That Remembers

At sunrise on Lake Huron the light arrives like forgiveness. It slides across the break wall, catches on the ribs of the charter boats, and folds itself into the slow rhythm of the harbor. The gulls are already up, arguing over breakfast in the shallows. Diesel mixes with pine. The water looks clean because that's what water does—it mirrors whatever sky you give it.

I grew up here, in Alpena, a town built on limestone and weather, where the lake is a boundary and a promise. My summers were counted in wind shifts and fishing tournaments, the first real lessons in reading what you couldn't see. In winter the bay locked itself under ice so thick it turned the horizon into an unbroken sheet of silence.

We once believed water was limitless. When something spilled, it disappeared. When the air smelled metallic after a storm, we said the wind would take care of it. We mistook patience for permanence.

The Weight Beneath the Surface

Before factories, there were forests. Men once walked floating logs down the rivers like tightropes, shouting over the current. Whole towns grew to the rhythm of the mill whistle—Alpena, Saginaw, Escanaba—each a hinge between wilderness and need. Sawdust filled the rivers until they ran the color of tea.

By the time the last pine fell, the shorelines had been remade for another hunger. Cement kilns, paper mills, and chemical plants replaced the mills. The Great Lakes became the country's workshop: steel from Gary, cars from Detroit, ships from Duluth. We built an empire out of water and then forgot that empires leak.

The lakes said nothing. They glittered, enormous and convincing. Only later would we learn that they had been keeping receipts.

The Science of Memory

When biologists began testing lake trout in the 1960s, they expected purity. What they found was memory—mercury where only muscle should be. Layer by layer, the lakes had stored a century of ambition: soot, oil, heavy metals, the ghost of industry settling like fine dust.

The chemistry was simple, the meaning complicated. Mercury drifted from smokestacks, settled in rain, and slipped into rivers. Microbes transformed it into something more dangerous—methylmercury—a toxin that moves quietly up the food web from plankton to perch to people.

The discovery arrived not as panic but as an ache. We had built our comfort on water and that same water had returned the favor, offering back everything we had placed in it. Progress had entered the bloodstream.

The Turning Point

By the late 1970s, the truth could no longer be filtered. Scientists and field officers drove the shorelines with coolers and notebooks, collecting samples, trying to find language equal to the problem. They spoke of parts per million and threshold limits, but at church suppers and fish fries the talk sounded different: *If the fish are sick, what about us?*

Early advisories were printed on thin paper that wilted in the humidity. *One meal per month. Two per week. Do not eat.* The words carried the weight of scripture but none of the comfort. People didn't know whether to argue or obey. In small towns, every warning felt personal.

Public meetings filled gymnasiums. Folding chairs scraped against tile floors as biologists projected diagrams of food chains—the ladder of life that now looked more like a funnel. The contamination wasn't abstract; it was inherited, passed like a story from one body to another.

And yet, people didn't abandon the lakes. They adapted. They cleaned their catch more carefully, grilled instead of fried, trimmed away the fat where toxins lingered. They shared what they learned. It was a kind of folk science, a conversation that kept evolving. The water was teaching us again, this time through consequence.

The lesson was humility: data doesn't change behavior, understanding does. When scientists began listening—really listening—to the communities they were trying to protect, trust returned in small increments. The language softened from decree to dialogue. A sign on a pier became an invitation to think, not an order to stop.

Michigan's Model

Decades later, the state translated those lessons into something enduring. Around 2012, the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services rebuilt the dense, bureaucratic advisories into a program anyone could understand. It was called *Eat Safe Fish*.

Its rhythm was simple—three verbs that fit in the palm of your hand: **Choose. Clean. Cook.**

Choose smaller, younger fish. Clean away the fat where pollutants hide. Cook so the oil—and what it carries—drips free.

No fear, no scolding. Just information shaped for daily life. The program measured portions by the *MI Serving*—your own hand. The same gesture that hauls a line or flips a fillet became the tool for safety.

Color-coded maps replaced spreadsheets: green for “Eat Often,” yellow for “Once a Month,” red for “Do Not Eat.” You didn’t need English to understand them. Laminated cards hung in bait shops and diners from Monroe to Marquette. The maps became part of the landscape, another way of reading the lakes.

When new chemicals emerged—PCBs, dioxins, then PFAS—the template held. The science shifted, the trust did not. What had begun as an emergency became a culture of awareness.

The PFAS Frontier

In 2017, another word entered the Michigan vocabulary: PFAS—per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances, the “forever chemicals.” The discovery began near Wurtsmith Air Force Base in Oscoda, a stone’s throw from where my wife and I grew up in the 80’s and 90’s. Groundwater tests revealed contamination that sounded impossibly modern, synthetic, designed to last longer than memory.

But Michigan already had a language for this. Instead of panic, the state added PFAS to the same tables, the same calm tone. Bluegill—one serving per month. Rock bass—do not eat. The message changed, the trust did not.

People kept fishing. They just fished differently. Knowledge had become part of the ritual, as familiar as checking the weather.

Safer Catch

From those lessons came a new framework—one that belongs to everyone who eats from the water. I call it **Safer Catch**. Four verbs in a loop: *Choose. Clean. Cook. Connect.*

It isn’t a campaign or a brand. It’s a rhythm, the same one Michigan learned to live by. It begins with choice, ends with community, and circles back through responsibility. It invites chefs, teachers, anglers, and health workers into the same conversation.

In the Great Lakes, this rhythm has already reshaped menus. Walleye and lake trout give way to whitefish and perch—faster-growing species that hold less of what we can’t see. Grills replace fryers. Fat is trimmed. Each act of cooking becomes a quiet expression of care.

To cook safely isn’t to fear the water; it’s to respect its memory.

The Culture of Clarity

When I visit schools or hospitals now, the conversations are different. People don't ask if the lakes are poisoned; they ask how to cook smarter, how to teach the next generation not to repeat the same assumptions. The talk is of stewardship, not surrender.

There's a kind of grace in that. We've stopped pretending the water forgets us. Instead, we've learned to meet its patience with our own.

The Eat Safe Fish model and the communities that built it have given us a vocabulary for living honestly with complexity. We can acknowledge the chemistry without losing the joy of the catch, the ritual of the meal. We can teach our children that caution isn't fear—it's fluency.

The Long Memory

The Great Lakes remember everything that touches them: sawdust, smoke, ambition, recovery. Each generation adds a layer, and the question is whether that layer deepens the wound or begins the healing.

These days, the memory is changing. Mercury and PCB levels are lower than they've been in decades. PFAS remains a challenge, but the response is faster, clearer, built on trust instead of denial. The same waterways that once carried industry now carry information—maps, data, shared wisdom flowing in both directions.

Every safe recipe, every updated advisory, every student who learns to read the color of the water adds another line to the story. The kitchen becomes a shoreline, the act of cooking an act of restoration.

Clean water, like good food, is never permanent. It's maintained.

And if the lakes have taught us anything, it's that memory is not just what we keep—it's what we're willing to improve.

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