

# **NATION TO NATION**

**Treaties Between the United States & American Indian Nations**

**EDITED BY SUZAN SHOWN HARJO**

## *“The Fish Helped to Bring People Together”*

An Interview with Zoltán Grossman

SUZAN SHOWN HARJO

**ZOLTÁN GROSSMAN:** My real background on treaty rights came as a community organizer in northern Wisconsin during the conflict of the late 1980s, early 1990s, after the federal courts reaffirmed Ojibwe treaty rights to harvest walleye, muskie, and other fish as well as deer and medicine plants outside the boundaries of the reservation. There was an immense backlash from white sport-fishing groups, from anti-treaty organizations like Protect Americans’ Rights and Resources and Stop Treaty Abuse. They held protests at the boat landings and on the lakes in northern Wisconsin, at night, during the spring spearfishing season.

The Ojibwe were beginning to reinvigorate their culture and find again their cultural roots in harvesting these resources in seasonal cycles, as they had for millennia. And the white sport fishermen and other groups—and the media—didn’t understand what this was about. They thought it would be the destruction of the resource. They thought that the tourist economy, the lifeblood of northern Wisconsin, would be destroyed by the tribes, even though the Ojibwe never took more than 3 percent of the walleye. Some of these groups started to organize very violent harassment of not only the spearfishers out on the water but also the families of the Ojibwe, right there at the boat landings.

I was part of an effort organized by the Midwest Treaty Network and Witness for Nonviolence, which trained about two thousand people, mainly non-Indians like myself, to go to the boat landings to monitor the harassment, try and deflect some of the violence, and try to show these groups for what they were. And also to open up dialogue with some of the people in northern Wisconsin . . . who had been misled by these groups into believing that the Ojibwe were going to threaten their livelihood and their rural culture. . . .

I remember one lake, Sand Lake. I believe it was April of ’91. And it was a very hostile crowd, a mob of people were burning Native flags [and] throwing rocks, and I remember recording one remark from a mother who was talking to her two little kids—they couldn’t have been more than six and seven. She saw that the boats were over by the shoreline of her lake, and she said, “Let’s go over to Grandma’s, they’re over there, and let’s get some rocks and let’s throw some rocks at the Indians.” So their public face was very much, “Oh we’re concerned about the fish; we’re concerned about the tourism,” but [their hostility] was very evident [at] the boat landings [from] the violence that was being inflicted on the spearfishers and their families—pipe bombs, sniper fire, full beer cans, people being run off the road at night.

This is the type of thing that we put in the Witness for Nonviolence reports in the late eighties and early nineties. . . . So—by monitoring and exposing the racism of some of the leadership of these [anti-treaty] groups, and by getting a federal court injunction against anti-Indian harassment in northern Wisconsin, and by discrediting the lies that some of these groups had put forth—we began to reach some of the people who were following these movements, and they began to fall away.

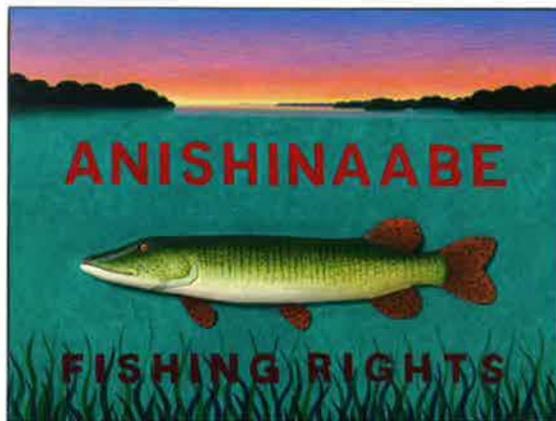
At the same time, multinational mining companies started to come into the ceded territories of northern Wisconsin to open metallic sulfide mines along some of the same rivers and streams that were of concern to both the spearfishers and the anglers. And some of the anglers—Trout Unlimited, Wall-eyes for Tomorrow—actually began to realize that not only were the tribes not the enemy when it came to the fish population but also that, in fact, the tribes could end up—with their treaty rights standing in federal court, with their cultures reinvigorated, with their gaming—being some of the best

allies in fighting these mining companies. So the same two groups, the tribes and the sport fishers, that had fought over the fish were by the mid-1990s actually coming together to protect the same fish from a common outside threat. And what I found is that it was some of the areas with the most intense conflicts over the natural resources that ended up having the strongest alliances between the former adversaries.

In the short run the tribes may have alienated some of their white neighbors, but they reached and educated more people through fighting and asserting their rights. In the areas where they asserted their rights the most strongly, they actually educated people on the history and culture of the area. They knocked a lot of non-Indian people off the fence and made them realize that tribal sovereign regulations were stronger than state regulations in fighting these mining companies. In particular, [to fight the proposed] Crandon Mine along the Wolf River—which is sacred to the Menominee—in an area where wild rice is harvested by the Ojibwe, the tribes built an alliance with the sport-fishing groups that were downstream. They ended up defeating the world's largest mining companies by 2003.

Not only did this very strong alliance of sport-fishing groups, environmentalists, and tribes defeat the mining companies, but two of the tribes, the Mole Lake Ojibwe and [the] Forest County Potawatomi, ended up actually purchasing the five thousand-acre mine site themselves, and they now own it, control it, and will determine its future. And many of the non-Indian people, the rural white neighbors, the retired folks, the cottage owners, the sport fisherman, are grateful that the tribes asserted their sovereignty to regulate the air and water around the reservation. That sovereign power is what gave the alliance the standing to fight the state government, which was going to allow the mining to take place. If it weren't for the tribes having fought for those treaty rights and on-reservation sovereign rights, that mine would almost certainly be going right now.

The white neighbors of the tribes went from hos-



David P. Bradley (Minnesota Chippewa, White Earth Ojibwe) b. 1954. *Anishinaabe Fishing Rights*. Canvas, wood, paint. 102 × 76.2 cm. National Museum of the American Indian 26/9269

tility to realizing that sovereignty was really the only thing between them and the destruction of their environment and their tourist economy. So the fish divided people at first, and in the end the fish helped to bring people together. And I think that they're building economic relationships, cultural relationships that never would have been possible before. This kind of cooperation, collaboration, which came from the grassroots—it came from the bottom up—is starting to bring some local and state officials along.

So I went from real despair to real hope, seeing how some of the tribes are using their sovereignty to build new models of ecological sustainability, new economic models to try to keep kids from leaving for the city or to draw people back to the reservation. I think a lot of the non-Indian communities are starting to learn from this. In a way, the reservations are becoming like greenhouses, places where new ways of relating to each other and new ways of relating to the land—which actually draw on very ancient traditions—are now beginning to flourish. And some of the white neighbors are starting to realize, if these people can do it, maybe we can, too.

*From an interview that took place in September 2005 at The Evergreen State College in Olympia, Washington.*