**Lee Staples Relationship with the Environment**

Aaniin. I am Lee Staples, an Elder of the Mille Lacs Band. I think the value of this column is to share some of our Anishinaabe teachings, because I believe we all need to have an appreciation for each other’s cultures. Today, I’d like to share some of our teachings about the environment.

Indian people have a close relationship with the environment. For example, there is our relationship with Mille Lacs Lake. We recognize the lake as having a spirit, a power much greater than any human being, that we acknowledge. In our ceremonies, offerings are given to that spirit within the lake. When I was a child, the old people who raised me told me to make my offering of tobacco before I went out on Mille Lacs Lake or any of the other lakes. They told me, “Remember that there is a spirit or a power out in that lake that we need to respect as a people.”

When we go out to fish, we do the very same thing – we make an offering before we go out on the lake. And before we go out to harvest wild rice on the lake, we do the same thing.

So we have a strong relationship with those powers within the lake, and therefore we don’t want to hurt the lake or the fish that are there. We are taught as a people to take only what we need, and maybe sometimes take some to share with others from the community who don’t have any. We are taught to stay away from greed.

We have a similar relationship with everything in the environment. The trees, for example. There is a spirit within those trees that we call Mitigwaabi wi inini. That would probably translate into English as “bow man.”  Years ago, when the trees were used to build wigwams, the people would do an offering before they cut the trees, to respect that spirit in the trees. This is a practice that is continued to this day.

The same is true of the earth. We believe there’s a power within the earth, in the center of the earth, that we do our offerings to – even to this day. For example, we have done offerings for new projects on the reservation, like the Conoco gas station in Ahzhoomog, near Hinckley. Before that project started, the Band had me come out there, and we did an offering of tobacco and food, especially for the earth where they were going to be digging and the trees that were going to be cut.

Our relationship with everything in the environment is an important part of our teachings. Our ancestors lived off the land, and so we had a lot of respect for things in the wild. There are foods we were given as a people to eat – the berries, the wild rice, the fish, the venison, the rabbits. We were taught to respect all of this.

If you take a look at environmental issues like pollution, I believe it would be good for people to learn from us. By sharing our appreciation and respect for the environment, I think it can help this world in the long run.