

# Community Connections

## Mde Maka Ska, or “What’s in a name?”

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In 2008, **Nawayee Center School**<sup>1</sup> in Minneapolis initiated a partnership with a variety of community organizations<sup>2</sup> to mobilize area schools and organizations in launching the first annual **Mde Maka Ska Canoe Nations Gathering**. The community partners envisioned an indigenous and water resources-based education and recreation event that celebrates water-based traditions of canoeing and fishing and promotes and demonstrates a healthy lifestyle for Native youth and the broader community. They accomplished this through creating a linguistically, culturally and historically infused initiative called “Mde Maka Ska” generated by indigenous Dakota precepts regarding water and the sacred craft it inspired: the canoe. **Anishinabe** views and traditions are also included.

The inaugural event on **Lake Calhoun** in August 2009 drew approximately 400 participants from Minneapolis area schools and community. **Here is a short video of the event.**

The **MinnAqua Program** participates in Mde Maka Ska events by teaching fishing skills, aquatic ecology and water safety. We also

provide **Fishing: Get in the Habitat!** curriculum and resources to support teachers and students.



Calhoun Lake combines great fishing with great views of Minneapolis, The City of Lakes.

### Mde Maka Ska:

#### The Historical Name

Lake Calhoun has a long history of connecting people to the outdoors. The original Dakota name for Lake Calhoun is “**Mde Maka Ska**”, a Dakota word that means White Earth Lake.

In the mid-19th century (through 1830s), a Dakota Mdewakanton village was located on the west shore of this lake that would come to be known as Lake Calhoun in the area that would become Minneapolis. **Cloud Man**, also known as Man-of-the-Sky (Ma-hpi-ya-wi-ca-sta), was the renown chief of this village, known as Reyataotonwe (Inland Village). For generations Dakota people lived an active, healthy, outdoor lifestyle: hunting, gathering, and fishing, using birch and dugout canoes to move between the village and Haha Wakpa (Mississippi River).<sup>3</sup>

#### A Name That Holds Meaning for the Present and Future

For today’s Minneapolis-St. Paul Native American community, Lake Calhoun’s proximity and the cultural stories and heritage grounded in the name “Mde Maka Ska” inspire a traditional means to return to cultural, emotional, mental, physical, and spiritual health. “As water does for the finned nation, “Mde Maka Ska” provides an appropriate environment in which to implement visions of healthier indigenous nations and healthier communities.”

#### The Event

At 2011’s event, 500 middle and high school students participated from five Minneapolis schools, as well as native elders, community environmentalists, teachers and school administrators. The event has grown to include Dakota language development and water activities: canoeing, canoe and water safety instruction; fishing fundamentals, species identification and fish consumption safety; aquatic/shoreline



Students preparing to canoe on Lake Calhoun

plant identification; environmental conservation/stewardship; songs and drumming about paddling and Mde Maka Ska; birch bark canoe construction; and paddle design, construction and painting.

### Outcomes

All participants experience firsthand the values learned by the occupants of a canoe – which are that, *no matter what your skin color – communication, cooperation, teamwork and trust are necessary to achieve a healthy and well-balanced craft.*

Mde Maka Ska efforts are inspiring a growing resurgence of the canoeing and fishing traditions among urban students and native communities in Minnesota. The event planners are

working to expand Mde Maka Ska from an annual event into a year-round opportunity for Native American youth, parents, students, teachers and the entire community to genuinely re-engage with the sacredness of water or **mní wakan**; in **learning that is centered in place**, in the outdoors, and in community; and with the traditional, healthy activities of canoeing and fishing in and around our Minnesota neighborhood lakes, rivers and streams.

*"But that is the beauty of the best geographic names. Whether they derived from careful observation, thorough knowledge of the landscape, or complete misinterpretation of cultural cues, they tell a story and, with patience, provide greater understanding of the land. The next time you hear "What's in a name?" remember the answer might be, 'More than you think'." – Greg Brening, **A Sense of Place, The Legacy of Names**, Conservation Volunteer MN DNR<sup>4</sup>*

### Mde Maka Ska - May 25, 2012

This year's **Mde Maka Ska Canoe Nations Gathering** event will be May 25, 2012 at Lake Calhoun (near Thomas Beach) in Minneapolis. To get involved or to learn more about Mde Maka Ska call 612-879-1744 or 651-230-4161; or **email**.



Students observing aquatic invertebrates found in Lake Calhoun

Notes:

<sup>1</sup>**Nawayee Center School** provides transformative education, grounded in indigenous life-ways and love of learning to American Indian youth in grades 7-12. Cultural values, core academics and experiential education are integrated throughout its curriculum.

<sup>2</sup>Many educational, recreational, environmental, business and other public/private partners include the **Phillips Indian Educators**, Minneapolis Public Schools, Outward Bound Twin Cities, **DNR's MinnAqua Program**, Minneapolis Police Dept, Philadelphia Community Farms, REI, Public Allies, **Migizi Communications** and the **Minneapolis American Indian Center** (MAIC), and Minnehaha Creek Watershed District.

<sup>3</sup>**Minnesota Place Names**, Warren Upham, Minnesota Historical Society

<sup>4</sup>**A Sense of Place, The Legacy of Names**, Greg Brening, Conservation Volunteer, 2001 Jan. – Feb., MN DNR