NEWS

FOREST KEEPERS: Menominee have been practicing sustainable forestry for centuries

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NEOPIT - In the rich green of the forest that creeps to the very edge of this village, one can glimpse not only how the northern landscape used to be, but also something of the spirit and the culture of the Native American people who live in the shadowy depths of the trees. <

The Menominee have been caring for this forest for centuries. It is as much a part of their lives as their families and homes. It is, to them, old and sacred and alive. <

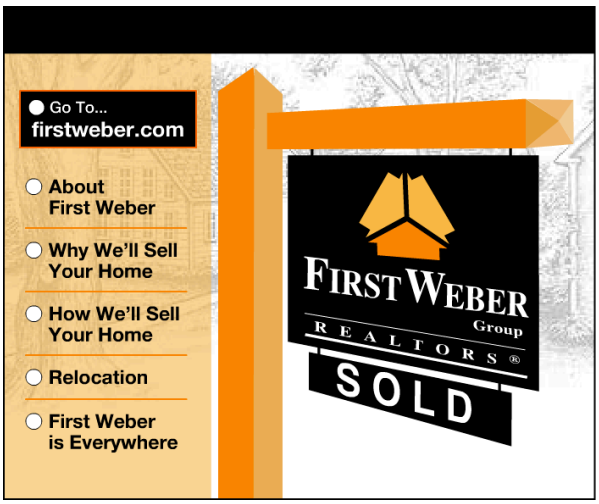
On a very basic level, said Alan Caldwell, director of the Menominee Cultural Institute, the forest has always provided food and shelter. <

"The survival and the maintenance of the Menominee as a people is directly related to the forest that we have," Caldwell said. <

Most importantly, Caldwell said, the forest provides the Menominee people with a link to their storied past and to the old ways that have allowed them to endure through even the most difficult of times. It provides old medicines, silence, and hidden places to conduct ancient ceremonies. <

"Because of this connection," Caldwell said, "this connection with the forest, we have been able to maintain our cultural and spiritual values." <

These words remain simply words until one is swallowed by the forest. On a warm summer day, Marshall Pecore, the tribe's chief forester, walked a shaded forest road and talked about the Menominee and their forest. From the edges of the dirt two-track, called Camp One Road, the forest spread into green shadow. Beams of sunlight spilt through openings and lit the forest floor with its ferns and moss-covered logs. The trunks of enormous white pine trees rose like pillars, one after another, holding the high canopy aloft. Deep from the forest came the reedy fluting of a thrush. It seemed an ancient, timeless place. <



But Pecore, in his jeans and dusty work boots, brought a down-to-earth reality to the dreamlike forest. It is, after all, a working forest that provides many in the band a livelihood through logging and jobs at the sawmill. <

It is almost impossible to believe that since 1865 nearly 2 billion board feet (one board foot is equal to a board one foot square and one inch thick) of lumber has been cut from the forest. Yet, Pecore said, there remains 1.5 billion standing board feet, the same volume that was standing when the Menominee signed the treaty that made this forest their home. <

Though Pecore is not a tribal member, he grew up on the reservation and has spent a lifetime listening to elders and learning how the forest is so much a part of the tribe's identity and life. It is their grocery and pharmacy and church, all rolled into one, he said. Most years, according to Pecore, tribal members kill 1,000 deer and as many as 100 bear in the forest. They kill rabbits, squirrels and ruffed grouse. They trap beaver and muskrats. They harvest plants for food and medicine. They pick blackberries and raspberries. <

To the Menominee, then, the forest is much more than a forest. It is striking in appearance, partly because it so contrasts with the mostly cleared farmland that surrounds it. Coming from the south, on Highway 47, one hits a wall of green and enters into it as if entering a tunnel. It covers 223,000 of the reservation's 235,033 acres. It is dark and cool, even in the heat of summer. <

"Right there at the village border, there's the timber," said Pecore. "You can just kind of look out the back door of any house and there is the forest. That speaks of a land ethic, of some pretty good wisdom. This is an island of timber in an ocean of cleared land." <

On a recent flight of the space shuttle, one of the astronauts noted the rectangular block of green Menominee forest in north central Wisconsin. It looked, the astronaut said, like a "jewel." The forest is so visible from space, according to UW-Madison forestry scientist John Kotar, that satellites use the forest edges to focus their cameras. <

The presence of such a forest is even more remarkable for its history. Caldwell and others say that the deep connection the tribe has to its forest comes at least partly from the knowledge that it is but a small remnant of what once existed. This is true, in fact, for all of Wisconsin's tribes. These are peoples who once lived in large and expansive natural landscapes with room to roam and live according to what bounty the seasons offered. <

Now, they live on small remnants of their native lands and, in many cases, still fight to keep those. It lends even more motivation for them to care for the land that remains. At numerous times in the tribe's difficult history, the Menominee have had to fight, frequently without success, to keep their land and their forest from being wrested away. <

The battle the tribe has waged to hold onto its land has been a long one; the Menominee are the oldest continuous residents of Wisconsin and have lived here for 10,000 years. Their ancestral homeland once covered 9.5 million acres of land in what is now central and northeastern Wisconsin and the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. In 1854, the tribe signed a treaty with the United States government that left the Menominee with 276,400 acres along the banks of the wild Wolf River in northeast Wisconsin. <

That acreage would be further reduced in the 1970s during a disastrous federal experiment in which the government terminated reservation status for the Menominee and the land was divided up for private ownership among tribal members. But several thousand acres of tribal land ended up being purchased by white buyers at tax sales after Indians defaulted on their payments. In 1973, tribal status was restored but not before the reservation had been reduced to around 235,000 acres. <

Still, the Menominee have a powerful connection to the land on which they live today. It is, as Caldwell said, where they have always lived. And that is no small thing. <

"We are the only true residents of Wisconsin," Caldwell said. "We are one of the few tribes east of the Mississippi with land holdings in the ancestral region where we have always lived." <

Almost continually, from the time of the 1854 treaty until today, the Menominee have cut timber from their forest. In fact, soon after the Menominee signed the treaty, the tribe bought a squatter's sawmill on Indian land and started cutting small amounts of timber. And, that far back, tribal chiefs considered the problem of living on such a small land base and caring for the forest in a way that guaranteed its health, its sustainability for future generations of Menominee. <

The tribe's oral history includes this direction from those early chiefs about how to cut the forest: <

"Start with the rising sun, and work toward the setting sun, but take only the mature trees, the sick trees, and the trees that have fallen. When you reach the end of the reservation, turn and cut from the setting sun to the rising sun and the trees will last forever." <

It is, according to Pecore, a very early definition of what would later become known as sustainable forestry - the practice of logging in such a way that it remains productive and healthy far into the future. In the years since, the tribe has refined its sustainable logging practices until its approach to cutting timber is an interesting and effective combination of natural science and native intuition and knowledge. <

Pecore, walking Camp One Road, talked about the Menominee approach to logging. Now and then he would stop to slip into a stand of trees and stand in its shade and explain how to grow a healthy forest. <

There are numerous ways to grow a forest, Pecore said, and to harvest its timber. One way - the wrong way - is to simply cut everything, as was done in northern Wisconsin in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Over a number of years, the state's entire white pine forest was cut, sold and shipped east to build homes. Fortunes were made; the forest was lost. That, Pecore said, is the antithesis of sustainable forestry. Foresters have a name for the practice, Pecore said. It's called "liquidation." <

The Menominee resisted such cutting during the logging era, even though there was tremendous pressure from the period's lumber barons. They were less successful at protecting their forest from another surprising threat: the U.S. Forest Service. In 1905, after a tornado blew down 40 million board feet, U.S. Sen. Robert M. La Follette succeeded in getting a bill passed that directed the U.S. Forest Service to organize logging on the reservation on a sustained yield basis - selectively cutting timber so that the forest regenerated itself. The tribe had been using such a practice for years. <

La Follette's intentions were good - getting help for the tribe to clear up the mess from the tornado. Unfortunately, the timber-hungry Forest Service, which knew nothing at the time about sustainable forestry, simply ignored La Follette's mandate and started clear cutting entire sections of the Menominee forest. The cutting continued until 1926 when the Interior Department managed to wrestle control of Menominee logging from the Forest Service and return it to the tribe. <

Over the next 12 years, the tribe scaled cutting back to less than half of what was being cut by the Forest Service. In 1934, the tribe sued the forest service for mismanaging its forest. Evidence introduced showed more than 10 percent - half a billion board feet of lumber - of the reservation forest had been clear-cut. The Menominee won the suit and the tribe was awarded $8.5 million. <

But the forest would require considerable care to recover. In the years since, Pecore said, the tribe has developed innovative sustainable forestry techniques - all growing from that early direction from tribal chiefs - that have restored the forest to health. <

Pecore explained that the sustainable forestry program that has evolved on the reservation involves detailed inventories and mapping of the forest, an understanding of what kind of trees a particular plot of land is best suited to grow, and a willingness to forego the much more profitable route of cutting what trees the market most demands. Cutting is based on the health and natural diversity of the forest rather than on what will make the most money. <

Menominee foresters conduct two inventories. One tells them what kind of trees are growing where. Another tells them about the health of those trees - the area they cover, their condition and volume - and allows them to determine how much of the forest can be harvested annually or over a longer period. <

Data are collected according to stands, which are areas of like species. All of this information is combined using computers and a Geographical Information System, or GIS, a computer-based mapping system. From the data, foresters can figure out when and where to cut timber. <

One of the most interesting innovations in Menominee forestry is the system used by the tribe to figure out what trees should be grown where. It's interesting because it combines old knowledge from tribal elders with modern forestry science. <

Pecore explained the system by kneeling in the forest along Camp One Road and digging up a handful of rich loam, from which sprouted ferns and other plants. With trees as with all growing plants, Pecore said, it is the soil that determines what grows best. Certain soils, he said, are best for certain species of trees. The key to identifying soil types, he added, is to recognize what specific kinds of plants grow there. <

With the help of Kotar, the UW-Madison forestry scientist, the tribe has developed a way to type a particular plot of forest by identifying the herbaceous plants that grow there. Certain plants indicate what species of trees would naturally grow best in that location. <

"Over thousands of years," said Pecore, "these plant communities have become very site specific. So we look for the relative number of ferns and other key plant indicators. Once you've done that you can relate it to what trees would grow best there white pine, oak or yellow birch." <

While working with Kotar on this system, Pecore was intrigued to find that the approach was one that elders in the tribe knew intuitively. He'd talk with them, he said, and realize they could easily predict what kind of trees would grow in a certain location because of the presence of certain plants on the site. <

"So this system," Pecore said, "takes that gut feeling they acquired from their years of tromping through the forest and applies it to today." <

The important thing about this kind of forestry, Pecore said, is that the land itself tells the tribe what kinds of trees will grow best in certain places. In other kinds of logging, he said, the market drives what kinds of trees are grown in a forest. But for the Menominee, he said, the forest drives the mill, the mill doesn't drive the forest. <

This has required sacrifice on the tribe's part, Pecore said. It would be much more profitable and much less work to simply grow all even-aged stands of whatever trees are most in demand for furniture or home building. <

Pecore explained it this way in an analysis of the tribe's approach: <

"From an economic standpoint, the Menominee could be very wealthy if they chose to liquidate their forest. But that is not an option. The Menominee do not look at their forest just as a source of economic benefit. Thus, they continue to manage the forest as their ancestors did - for their children and their children's children." <

Pecore, who grew up on the reservation, has seen the people there go through tough times, suffering through some of the highest poverty rates in the state. Yet, he said, he's never heard anyone suggest that the forest be cut in any way that would destroy it for future generations. <

"Why do they have that willingness to sacrifice?" asked Pecore, still standing in the depths of the Menominee forest and staring up to where the sunlight spills down through the high branches. "Maybe it is because they have lived here for so many thousands of years. I don't know." <

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