

Forest Management, the Menominee Tribe, Culture, and Traditional Knowledge

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The history of Menominee Tribal Enterprises (MTE) is a fascinating and romantic story about our forest and how the Menominee people have successfully managed it for eons. Today, these management practices have resulted in an extraordinary, healthy, and productive emerald forest whose boundaries can be seen from space. The picture from space clearly shows more than a geographic boundary. It is silent testimony of a resilient culture that responsibly cared for their land, for the benefit of mankind and the planet itself. There is no story quite as powerful and compelling as MTE. That beautiful story is about the love of our land and how we managed the forest using the virtuous principals of love, honor, and respect.

Our tribal forest is as special as it is exemplary. Its philosophical, cultural, and spiritual framework speaks eloquently to the Native American Indian connection with Mother Earth. The old advertising maxim, “Sell the sizzle not the steak,” applies to MTE. We have an abundant amount of sizzle to sell that no one else has. It is ensconced in the sensitive way in which we balance our economic interest against our spiritual, ecological, and cultural interest. A wellspring of opportunities has surfaced here, especially from the rising number of consumers who are sensitive to the environmental issues related to living sustainably by respecting our Mother the Earth! Thus, our history of forest management will tell the world who we are and what we do; this is what MTE proudly stands for.

As an enrolled Menominee Indian and President of MTE, I am very proud of the vast continuous verdant forest we manage. This wonderful ecosystem has given life to the tribe for thousands of years. This emerald giant is more than a forest; it is our spiritual home. We treat it with love, honor, and respect. This precious forest is a sacred place of our cultural expression because it is a highly regarded part of our tribal identity and values. The Menominee Indians are the people of this “place.” And this place communicates to us that we have responsibilities to the rest of the natural world that transcend our own personal desires and wishes.

Through countless generations these principles stand at the forefront when we make decisions to manage “Akia”—meaning Menominee Land. The Menominee Forest stands as a cherished monument to the foresight of our tribal ancestors who vigilantly protected the sacred ground they inherited. Today, MTE strives to emulate our ancestor’s spiritual discipline. MTE in many ways embodies the culture, values, and spirituality of our forefathers. The values of Menominee culture lie deep in the soul of our forest. Native Americans, particularly the Menominee, are at the lead in articulating an indigenous epistemology that has moved beyond virtually anything in print or practice.

Furthermore, MTE has been built upon the understanding of the need to integrate advance science, technology, and business discipline into the organization, all within a cultural context. Our land ethic and commitment to sustainable forest management practices and principles uniquely sets the Menominee forestry apart from all other integrated forest management/wood products business, nationally and internationally. As native people, we need to promote a healthy tension as we compare scientific knowledge with our own cumulative wisdoms.

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Since 1854, MTE has harvested more than 2.5 billion board feet of lumber from our sacred land. We have completely cut standing timber over the entire reservation twice. Yet, today we have more than a half billion board feet additional standing timber than when we started. A drive through or fly over our forest would show the results of a forest that looked like it had never been cut.

Under the Menominee Tribal Enterprises Forest Management Plan 2012–2027, Menominee Tribal Enterprises has been charged with the responsibility of managing the forest, which is held in trust through the U.S. Secretary of the Interior for the benefit of the Menominee People. The Secretary of the Interior and the Menominee Tribe have a legal responsibility to manage the forest under sustained yield principles.

Hardwoods are an important component of management on Menominee lands. According to MTE log delivery data, during the past 15 years loggers delivered 147,447,747 board feet (BF) of sawlogs to the sawmill located in Neopit, WI. From that total, 104,336,257 BF were hardwood logs. The average annual hardwood log deliveries for the past 15 years are around 7 million BF per year. During a normal logging year such as 2007 to 2008, 15,367,440 BF were harvested from the Menominee forest. Of that total, 12,602,855 BF were hardwoods. Hardwoods accounted for 82 percent of the annual total cut. Due to the rapid decline in the logging force coupled with climate change, MTE annual hardwood log deliveries have declined more than 50 percent. The financial and social implication are serious as MTE relies heavily on its hardwood lumber sales to sustain the mill operations.

When it comes to ensuring forestry is practiced in an environmentally responsible, socially beneficial, and economical way, no one does it better than Menominee Tribal Enterprises. History has proved it. Continuous Forest Inventory (CFI) has certified it.

The content of this paper reflects the views of the author(s), who are responsible for the facts and accuracy of the information presented herein.

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