

ASH TREES, INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES AND THE EMERALD ASH BORER

The indigenous peoples of the Great Lakes region (Ho-Chunk, Menominee, Odawa, Ojibwe, Oneida, Potawatomi and others) have long standing relationships with each species of ash tree (*Fraxinus sp.*) found in the regional flora. These trees have been historically and are currently relied upon for multiple uses, most notably the use of black ash (*Fraxinus nigra*) wood splints by traditional basket makers. Here I present a general summary to describe the relationships between the indigenous communities and the natural resources of the Great Lakes region. I also suggest the importance of including Tribal and First Nation communities in local and regional emerald ash borer abatement projects.

LAND TENURE TRADITIONS

Indigenous people have been ecological stewards of the land and natural resources of the Great Lakes region for thousands of years. Traditions vary, but teachings in most communities suggest that the lands and waters of our respective homelands take care of us and we must, therefore, reciprocally take care of our homelands. We are expected to take good care of our homeplace so that our descendants will have the opportunity to live as we live, dependant upon and connected to a diverse set of ecosystems. This land tenure responsibility has existed for thousands of years and continues to this day.

I want to clarify what I mean by dependency. When I say we are dependant upon the ecosystems in our home areas, I mean specifically that many people in Indian/First Nation communities have physical, financial and spiritual relationships with land and water resources. For example, many of our families eat foods that come from our homelands including fish, deer, moose, wild rice, maple sugar, berries, etc. Many of us also pay our bills from funds that we earn selling arts and crafts, firewood, fish, land leases, and so forth. Finally, many of us rely upon medicinal plants, ceremonial sites, sacred places and teachings that are directly tied to the lands and waters of this region.

Within Indian/First Nation communities, plants and animals are regarded as much more than just physical resources. They are seen as living, spiritual entities. They are members of our community and they are our relatives.

ASH PRESERVATION IN INDIAN COUNTRY

Ash trees continue to be used by Indian/Aboriginal people in the construction of many different items including, but not limited to, baskets, snowshoes, hunting and fishing decoys and canoe paddles. Within these communities, traditional black ash basket makers hold a considerable amount of knowledge about black ash and the ecosystems where these trees reside. Basket traditions are usually maintained within certain families, and those families often rely on plant materials such as black ash splints, along with their artistic talents, to financially sustain themselves. Members of these families are very knowledgeable about black ash distribution and ecology and many are actively involved in protecting ash from emerald ash borer (EAB).

If you are working on a local or regional EAB project, I suggest you connect with traditional basket makers because they hold many generations worth of traditional ecological knowledge that will likely be relevant to your project.

Although the most fervent drive to protect black ash resources might be found within basket making families, most members of Native communities in the Great Lakes recognize the critical importance of protecting all ash for future generations. These community members may currently serve or be interested in serving as volunteers in ash protection and EAB abatement projects and could help to bolster your existing core of volunteers. Additionally, many Native communities in the region have natural resource and environmental departments that are actively managing lands and engaging in forest protection. Many of these Tribal/First Nation natural resource and environmental departments (along with cultural and historic preservation departments) are working on EAB projects and should be included in EAB management and problem solving teams. These departments are also your best pathways to the aforementioned basket makers and would-be volunteers.

Everyone who is interested in fighting EAB comes to the table with a different set of teachings and a different understanding of what it will take to protect ash into the future. It is critical that Tribes/First Nations, federal, state, nonprofit and private entities all work together to devise management strategies that will diminish this prolific forest pest.

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