

Historical Uses of the Natural Resources by the Bad River Band of Ojibwe

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The Bad River Band is a part of the Chippewa nation. Each Indian band is made up of several clans that are a very close-knit, extended family. These families were very important to each individual, even more important than to the nation as a whole. This band currently resides on 124,234 acres of reservation land in northwestern Wisconsin. The reservation borders Lake Superior on the east, and more than 95 percent of this land is considered wild and undeveloped. The Chippewa people, also known as the Ojibwe, have lived in this area for hundreds of years. "The Ojibwe people have been located in this area since well before Columbus stumbled onto the Americas; historically, the French explorers Radisson and Groseilliers "discovered" Ojibwe people here in the mid-1600s."¹ This paper will discuss the ways in which this band of Chippewa Indians used the many natural resources that were available to them.

The historic culture of the Bad River Band suggests that they were semi-nomadic hunters, gatherers, and fishermen. They used the land on which they lived to its fullest extent; their lives were completely connected to the land. What they ate, and where they lived, was determined by the season and the natural resources available. Mother Nature provided all the necessary resources throughout the harsh winters as well as the plentiful summer months.

During the late winter and early spring months, the community moved along the banks of the Bad and White Rivers, where the banks are lined with countless Maple trees. When the temperature was right, sap would flow throughout these trees with ease, giving a perfect opportunity for the band members to collect mass amounts of sap from these trees. Retrieval was a simple process; a gash would be made in the bark, about three to four feet above the ground. Next, a spike would be driven into the tree at a downward angle so the sap would run

down the spike and drip into a container beside the tree.² These sap containers were made of Birch bark; another amazing resource that the Bad River band used extensively. Once the sap was gathered, it was boiled down to make sugar. The next step was to strain and cool the syrup and let it cool. Upon allowing the syrup to dry, it would be pounded into sugar granules, similar to what we use today. The sugar preserved itself in this form and the Indians would use it throughout the year.

Because they did not have salt, the tribe used this sugar in a variety of ways. The most common use for the sugar was to flavor the many different foods they ate. It was put on vegetables, meat and even fish. Another use of sugar was explained well by Allen Hanson; “Maple sugar was used at ceremonies and everyone was expected to eat all the sugar given to him, an enjoyable task. And just like now, the sugar was sometimes given to children to get them to take their medicine”.³

Sugar was also useful in the trading game. Since the tribe gathered a lot of sugar, it became an important item, trading large amounts with non-tribal members. Here is a quote that tells just how much syrup this band could produce; “Nevertheless, they still depended on traditional food supplies such as maple sugar for sustenance and income. For instance, in 1874, they (the Bad River band) produced several hundred gallons of maple syrup, and in 1875 produced 40 tons of maple sugar!”⁴

As mentioned earlier, Birch bark, taken from Paper Birch trees, was an important natural resource for this tribe of Native Americans. Cutting a slit lengthwise through the bark, and pulling it away from the wood took the bark from the tree. The best time to collect bark is in spring or early summer because the bark is of better quality, and more easily removed. While

removing the bark did not always kill the trees, it did weaken them and leave them more susceptible to infection.

The Paper Birch is an amazing tree. It grows all over in the northern U.S. and throughout Canada. The bark from this tree has so many fabulous qualities that it was used for everything from footwear to fire starters.

The bark is waterproof, as a result of the oils stored inside of it. This means that the Native Americans could use this product as a waterproofing agent, keeping water out or containing it in something, including baskets. The Bad River band used the water-resistant paper birch bark on the bottom of their footwear to keep them dry.

Another important use of this tree was residential; for the majority of the year their lodging consisted of wigwams, built by the women of the tribe. Gathering small, flexible saplings and fashioning them in a circular shape structured these houses. They were then bent towards each other in the center and attached. The Indians often used fibrous strips of bark from a basswood tree to tie the saplings together. This bark was used because it was strong and could be made into ropes relatively easily. Once the saplings formed a dome, large strips of birch bark were stretched over the saplings to make a rainproof dwelling. The door would be placed on the east side of the house to face the rising sun. In the winter, additional warmth was added by fashioning a mat out of cattails to cover the cold ground.⁵

In northern Wisconsin, there are a great number of lakes, rivers, and streams. The Bad River Band used these waters as pathways to the rest of their lands. The tribe traversed these water with canoes made from the Paper Birch Bark. These canoes were light, making them easy to paddle, or to carry long distances. This gave the Bad River Band an advantage over the other Indian tribes who might have used canoes made of heavier wood.

Along with transportation, fishing was another important use of the Birch bark canoe. After the sap collection season, the tribe would ready themselves for the annual fish spawn. The Bad River Band would move their main village to the intersection of the Bad, White, and Kakagon Rivers, looking for Walleye. The name Kakagon even translates as “walleye waters”.⁶ The tribe would catch their fish by either netting or spearing. “The Bad River Watershed drains over 1,000 square miles along Wisconsin’s north shore. The Chequamegon National Forest is found at the headwaters. The rivers of the watershed are important spawning grounds for sturgeon, lake-run trout, salmon and walleye as well as many other fish.”⁶ It is interesting to note that today the Bad River is one of only three rivers in the U.S. that has a self-sustaining population of Lake Sturgeon.⁷

The band would begin making canoes in June; this was when the bark was the thickest, sometimes up to quarter inch, making for a sturdier canoe. When making canoes, it was very important that the bark be as thick and as strong as possible so they would not have to repair any holes or cracks in the future. Interestingly, when the bark was collected from a tree they would cut down the tree and remove the bark in one long sheet. Once they had the bark, they would cut down a white cedar. They used this species because it was light as well as strong. The Indians would split the wood into narrow boards and bend them into the right shape while the wood was still green. White cedar was also used as floorboards on the canoes. Once the frame was intact, the birch bark was stretched over the frame to finalize the canoe. Any cracks in the canoe were sealed with a mixture of pitch from pine or spruce trees and animal fat.⁸

It was in August that the Bad River people would harvest the wild rice that grew in the Kakagon Slough. This was one of the most important resources to the Bad River Band. The survival of the tribe was based on the availability of this imperative food source; it grew

naturally and the only thing the tribe had to do was collect it and process it. To prepare the rice the women of the tribe often would boil and add it to corn, beans or squash. Maple syrup was also often added to the rice for a sweet tasting meal that met many of the nutrition needs of the people. Sometimes for a treat the rice was parched like popcorn. For long-term storage, a large dugout canoe would be filled with rice and buried. The tribe would bury these storage containers on the sunny side of a hill, so that rainwater would run off. Rice stored this way would keep for up to two years.⁹

Gathering the rice could prove to be hot and tiresome work, especially in August when the temperature was quite high. The most common method of harvesting was done with one man and one woman in the boat. The man generally stood aft and maneuvered through the rice stalks. Ten to sixteen foot long, crotched saplings would be used to grip the roots of the rice stalks and push with his push-pole. It would have been useless to attempt to paddle through the dense rice stalks. The woman would sit in the front and pull the rice stalks over the boat. Then she would knock off the ripened grain into the bottom of the boat with a short cedar stick.

After the rice was cleaned of unwanted materials such as twigs, pieces of stalks, small stones, and worms it was spread out on sheets of birch bark or blankets to dry in the sun. When it was dry, the women put several pounds of rice in a big iron kettle and parched it over an open fire. To keep it from scorching, they stirred it constantly with a wooden paddle. This parching process cured the rice and also helped loosen the outer husks. Final removal of the husks was accomplished by “dancing the rice”.¹⁰

Rice was soon trampled to remove the outer husks. One of the men wore special moccasins with high cuffs to prevent rice from entering. He then stepped into a hole in the

ground that had been lined with skin or into a wooden tub sunk in the ground. Leaning on a diagonal post for support, he would trample the rice, moving first on one foot and then the other.

The final chore was to separate the rice grains from their chaff, which was done on a windy day. Placing a quantity of rice into large birch bark winnowing trays, the women of the tribe flipped the rice kernels into the air. The chaff blew away and the heavy grains sank to the bottom of the tray. This technique took a good deal of finesse and practice; the goal was not to let too much of the rice hit the ground.

Along with this naturally occurring wild rice there was an abundance of wildlife for the Bad River Band. This meant fresh meat for the skilled hunters of the tribe to pursue. Bows with arrows and spears were used until they came into possession of firearms after trading with the white man. These white invaders, who soon forced the Bad River Band onto reservations, later diminished these hunting lands.

Treaties had a huge effect on the lives of the people belonging to the Band River Band. When the white man first came into northern Wisconsin to claim land, the Indians had to change their way of life. In the Treaty of 1854 the Chippewa Nation was forced on to a reservation. This land was near Lake Superior, and somewhat sizable. The people were still able to travel for fishing and production of maple sugar. The first seven articles of the Treaty of 1854 affected the Chippewa Nation a great deal. There were thirteen articles total, but that last six spoke of different bands that did not pertain to the Bad River Band.

Articles of a treaty made and concluded at La Pointe, in the State of Wisconsin, between Henry C. Gilbert and David B. Herriman, commissioners on the part of the United States, and the Chippewa Indians of Lake Superior and the Mississippi, by their chiefs and headmen.

- ARTICLE 1. The Chippewas of Lake Superior hereby cede to the United States all the lands heretofore owned by them in common with the Chippewas of the Mississippi, lying east of the following boundary line, to wit: Beginning at a point, where the east branch of

Snake River crosses the southern boundary line of the Chippewa country, running thence up the said branch to its source, thence nearly north, in a straight line, to the mouth of East Savannah River, thence up the St. Louis River to the mouth of East Swan River, thence up the East swan River to its source, thence in a straight line to the most westerly bend of Vermillion River, and thence down the Vermillion River to its mouth.

The Chippewas of the Mississippi hereby assent and agree to the foregoing cession and consent that the whole amount of the consideration money for the country ceded above, shall be paid to the Chippewas of Lake Superior, and in consideration thereof the Chippewas of Lake Superior hereby relinquish to the Chippewas of the Mississippi, all their interest in and claim to the lands heretofore owned by them in common, lying west of the above boundary-line.

- ARTICLE 2. [Designation of boundary lines]
- ARTICLE 3. The United States will define the boundaries of the reserved tracts, whenever it may be necessary, by actual survey, and the President may, from time to time, at his discretion, cause the whole to be surveyed, and may assign to each head of a family or single person over twenty-one years of age, eighty acres of land for his or their separate use: and he may, at his discretion, as fast as the occupants become capable of transacting their own affairs, issue patents therefor to such occupants, with such restrictions of the power of alienation as he may see fit to impose. And he may also, at his discretion, make rules and regulations, respecting the disposition of the lands in case of the death of the head of a family, or single person occupying the same, or in case of its abandonment by them. And he may also assign other lands in exchange for mineral lands, if any such are found in the tracts herein set apart. And he may also make such changes in the boundaries of such reserved tracts or otherwise, as shall be necessary to prevent interference with any vested rights. All necessary roads, highways, and railroads, the lines of which may run through any of the reserved tracts, shall have the right of way through the same, compensation being made therefor as in other cases.
- ARTICLE 4. In consideration of and payment for the country hereby ceded, the United States agree to pay to the Chippewas of Lake Superior, annually, for the term of twenty years, the following sums, to wit: five thousand dollars in coin; eight thousand dollars in goods, household furniture and cooking utensils; three thousand dollars in agricultural implements and cattle, carpenter's and other tools and building materials, and three thousand dollars for moral and educational purposes, of which last sum, three hundred dollars per annum shall be paid to the Grand Portage band, to enable them to maintain a school at their village. The United States will also pay the further sum of ninety thousand dollars, as the chiefs in open council may direct, to enable them to meet their present just engagements. Also the further sum of six thousand dollars, in agricultural implements, household furniture, and cooking utensils, to be distributed at the next annuity payment, among the mixed bloods of said nation. The United States will also furnish two hundred guns, one hundred rifles, five hundred beaver traps, three hundred dollars' worth of ammunition, and one thousand dollars' worth of ready made clothing, to be distributed among the young men of the nation, at the next annuity payment.

- ARTICLE 5. The United States will also furnish a blacksmith and assistant, with the usual amount of stock, during the continuance of the annuity payments, and as much longer as the President may think proper, at each of the points herein set apart for the residence of the Indians, the same to be in lieu of all the employees to which the Chippewas of Lake Superior may be entitled under previous existing treaties.
- ARTICLE 6. The annuities of the Indians shall not be taken to pay the debts of individuals, but satisfaction for depredations committed by them shall be made by them in such manner as the President may direct.
- ARTICLE 7. No spirituous liquors shall be made, sold, or used on any of the lands herein set apart for the residence of the Indians, and the sale of the same shall be prohibited in the Territory hereby ceded, until otherwise ordered by the President.¹¹

The first article came across as heartbreaking; it spoke of land that the tribe was forced to cede to the United States. The words used were, "The Chippewas of Lake Superior hereby cede to the United States". The second and third articles spoke of the small tracts of land that the entire Chippewa nation was forced to live on. The fourth and fifth articles were somewhat interesting because they stated how the government would provide for the tribe, including money, weapons and animal traps. The tribe was even provided with blacksmith services. Yet, no liquor could be sold or used on the reservation. The positive aspect of these treaties was that they put the Bad River people into a part of the state where many natural resources were abundant.

The Bad River Band is blessed with country that has produced a large amount of trees for many years. Not only do they have a great supply of Maple and Paper Birch trees, but they also have a large number of different species of evergreens. As in most of Wisconsin, the forest is covered with plenty of trembling and Big-Tooth Aspen. Red and White pine make up most of the marketable evergreens. There was also Hemlock, Balsam Fir and a few different Spruces. Between 1957 and 1959, the Bad River Band also cut and sold a lot of Hemlock trees (480,000 board feet).¹² That statistic is rather disturbing considering that Hemlock has been on the decline in recent years in the Wisconsin forests.

Previous to 1881, the Bad River people were encouraged to farm on the land given them in the treaty of 1854. William R. Durfee was appointed the Indian Agent responsible for the land on the reservation,¹³ and when he immediately wrote the Commissioner of Indian Affairs

regarding the tribe's success in timber, as opposed to an attempt at an agrarian life. He had this to say:

Bad River, the stream which gives its name to the reservation is navigable for small vessels to the village of Odanah. Its banks, and those of its tributaries are covered with large and valuable tracts of pine, mostly without the limits of the reservation, though many millions of feet are contained within its boundaries. The lumbering interests upon the upper waters of these streams have of late years assumed considerable proportions and among the men employed in this industry are many Indians from this reservation who make excellent workmen. The mouth of the stream being included within the reservation the sorting, rafting and c., of all the logs has to be done there, which also furnishes many of them employment during the summer¹³.

Once timber became a means of commercial work for the tribe, it helped them progress greatly. In the first season, the band made moderate profit on their pine. During this 1882-1883 season, they cut and sold 2,569,904 board feet of pine¹⁴. This brought them a decent yield, considering that the wood sold for \$5.00 to \$6.50 per 1,000 feet¹⁵. The second season was a huge year for the people; they sold 12,365,448 board feet of timber, clearing \$18,448¹⁶ after expenses. Dealing with millions of board feet was particularly impressive considering that this is somewhat of a small operation. Follows is a chart of some of the recent timber sale statistics for the Bad River Band has produced in the past.

Table 1

Bad River Reservation Timber Statistics 1951-1964

Year	Aspen	Balsam Fir	Basswood	Elm/Ash	Hemlock	Pine	Maple	Spruce	Paper/Yellow Birch
1951	717	35	7	25	19	17	33	6	4
1952	149	25	5	31	2	19	61	6	3
1953	560	13	3	-	-	-	-	-	-

1954	302	17	-	-	-	-	-	32	-
1955	158	15	8	32	31	11	36	22	13
1956	347	3	-	-	1	-	-	15	3
1957	213	12	-	-	2	-	-	5	3
1958	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
1959	141	3	-	-	160	-	-	1	6
1960	74	-	-	23	406	26	21	1	82
1961	31	1	-	-	297	1	-	1	6
1962	3	-	3	47	-	-	16	1	2
1963	147	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
1964	174	-	1	2	-	-	2	-	-

Timber cut by volume (MBM).¹⁷

It was along the Bad, White, and Kakagon Rivers that the people would plant gardens during the summer months, as the ground was very fertile. These rivers would often flood during the spring snowmelt, and after retreat, the waters left behind excellent topsoil, allowing the crops to flourish. It was imperative that the soil be rich; the Wisconsin growing season is quite short, and the Indians to take full advantage of the time they had. The mainstay of these gardens were corn, squash and beans.¹⁸

These agricultural products are often referred to as the “three sisters”. These three crops were often grown together because they complimented each other’s growth. These were planted on a mound of dirt, where the corn provided a stalk for the bean vines to climb. The beans, in turn, replenished nitrogen in the soil; keeping it fertile for the years to come. This was important because both squash and corn are nitrogen- reliant, leaving the soil nearly barren of nutrient. The bean plant also helps stabilize the corn stalk in high winds.

The squash performed two important tasks in this relationship; growing low to the ground, squash has very broad leaves. This provided shade directly beneath the other two plants, helping to prevent weeds in the poor sunlight. The shade was also important because it helped the soil retain more moisture, preventing water from evaporating in the sun. Squash also provided some protection from predators that might have a hankering for some beans and corn. The squash plant is classified as “spiny” and usually discouraged animals from harming the other plants.¹⁹

The Bad River people have used the available natural resources in amazing ways for hundreds of years. Early in this country’s history, before the appearance of white people, this band lived strictly from the land and the resources it provided. The white invasion did not deter this way of life entirely; the people were still able to make a living from the natural resources. Traditions like producing maple sugar remained, but adapting to commercialization came to the people with their wide sale of timber. Natural resources have sustained the Bad River Band for many years past, and hopefully, these resources can nourish them for years to come.

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³ Ibid

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⁵ Hanson, Allen S.

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⁷ Ibid

⁸ Hanson, Allen S.

⁹ "Wild Rice" Indian Country. <http://www.mpm.edu/WIRP/ICW-36.html>

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ "Treaty with the Chippewa September 30, 1854" Minnesota Department of Natural Resources http://www.dnr.state.mn.us/aboutdnr/laws_treaties/1854/text.html

¹² "A Forestry History of Ten Wisconsin Indian Reservations

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¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ Native Tech: Native American Technology and Art “Planting a Three Sisters Garden”

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¹⁹ Ibid

