

Akwesasne Mohawk

About Our Homeland

Student: Welcome to Akwesasne.

Student: Akwesasne, this land, this is my home.

Student: (Mohawk language) We thank you for coming.

Narrator: Akwesasne is located along the St. Lawrence River in northern New York and in the province of Quebec, Canada. The river serves as the border between the United States and Canada. On the American side of the river, the Akwesasne community covers almost 15,000 acres. There are another 7,400 acres on the Canadian side. This is an ecologically rich river environment, with more than 3,000 acres of wetlands located along riverbanks, islands, and inlets.

The Mohawks have developed an extensive knowledge of this environment, including the black ash trees that grow here. They know that the trees thrive in the wet areas of their homelands.

Les Benedict, Assistant Director, Environment Division, Saint Regis Mohawk

Tribe: The best trees are in areas that seasonally flood and then water recedes maybe towards the end of summer. This is a perfect site for black ash.

Wetlands were considered to be wasteland, and if you could drain it and if you could remove the trees, you'd have a rich source of soil for growing crops. There's always a conflict between housing, development, and forest. Throughout the 20th century and the 19th century a lot of lands in this area were drained and the trees were removed for agriculture.

Richard David, Mohawk Basketmaker and Assistant Director, Department of Environment, Mohawk Council of Akwesasne: So, it's looked upon as garbage

wood. Our Native people are the only ones that really hold it, like it's like a very special tree to us because we make all our baskets from it.

Narrator: The knowledge of basketmaking is taught from generation to generation.

Richard David: And a lot of the people that learn basketmaking, they sit there and they watch their mothers or their grandmothers, their fathers, their grandfathers making baskets. And they say, "I want to learn." And that's where they start.

Narrator: Harvesting black ash requires the ability to identify which trees will provide the best wood for basketmaking.

Junior Cook, Mohawk Elder: In my younger years, I started by, well, I was sort of an apprentice to the older men. And they would take me with them when they were collecting black ash. They wouldn't just take any tree. If you're not careful, you can get a bad tree.

Richard David: The characteristics we look for are they should be straight, free of any knots, and then we do a little notch into the tree to check the rings. And we're looking for the rings, the annual rings, at least the thickness of a nickel and that's what our basketmakers like to use.

Narrator: Preparing a tree to be made into baskets is a process that requires physical strength. It's also important to know how the tree is structured.

Richard David: And what we do is we take the back of an ax, once we cut the log and start pounding the log from one end to the other. And what that does is that those layers that are in there, it crushes those layers, which makes it a lot easier for us to take the layers off. As you're pounding, you start to see them lift, and once you crush those layers, it comes off. And we take them off the full length of the log, about two inches, two-and-a-half inches wide. And we put them in bundles, and we set them aside for basketmaking.

Narrator: A black ash forest is a diverse environment. It is home to a variety of animal life.

Richard David: Things like fox, rabbits, squirrels. You know, all those sort of things that like to make their homes under logs and shelters and stuff. Even some of the birds like to nest under there. It's also a good place for them to go cool down on a hot day. A lot of deer in here, lots of deer. I haven't seen one this morning, but I usually see some every time I come out here. Wildlife, birds, geese overhead.

Narrator: Sweetgrass, another important plant in the Mohawk homelands, is also used for making baskets. But for this and other important plants, chemical contamination is a problem.

Salli Benedict, Mohawk Basketmaker: They don't like grass growing on the side of the road, so they spray it with pesticides and defoliant. It's not good because a lot of times, I mean, we have to pick the grass, and then we handle the grass. Or, sometimes you hold the grass in your mouth. Or, sometimes, when you're weaving, you weave and you're holding it in your mouth. Your mouth is your other hand. So that's kind of the sad part of it all, you know, that it's not good sometimes where the grass is growing, or what people do to the land that affects the grass.

Junior Cook: Well, there's so much contamination in the area, we usually go away from here to pick our medicines. At least I do. It's hard. Sometimes I have to go a long ways.