Keepers of the Forest: The Menominee Indian Tribe of Wisconsin's Sustainable Forestry
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The Project:
As part of my Blugold Fellows scholarship, Dr. Rick St. Germaine and I researched the sustainable forestry practices of the Menominee Indian Tribe of Wisconsin. In order to obtain a well-rounded understanding of the tribe's forestry practices, all aspects of Menominee life, history, and culture were researched. The story of Menominee sustainability is a story of Menominee history, of Menominee struggles, and of Menominee persistence. The story of sustainability is also a story of the Menominee people, the tribe's goal to sustain the forest, their people, and their culture for an undefined measure of time. This story of Menominee sustainability is an important example of successful resource management in a time of increasing resource shortages and an example that is deeply rooted in tribal tradition.

The Early History:
The Menominee are an Algonquian people who have resided in Wisconsin for hundreds of years. Traditionally, the Menominee were organized into a clan system with 34 distinct clans and each clan had a specific role in the greater community. For example, the Crane Clan was the keeper of knowledge of how to make houses, canoes, and other things out of natural materials. Balance was required in traditional Menominee life and the people never took more than what they needed from their environment. Sustaining the forest was vital to the tribe's survival and this belief continues to drive the harvesting practices of Menominee Tribal Enterprises.

Contact with Europeans first occurred in 1634 when French explorer Jean Nicolet landed at Green Bay. At the time of contact, the Menominee lived on and utilized over 9.5 million acres of Wisconsin territory. Treaty making with the tribe started in 1817, beginning the battle over Menominee land and timber. In 1848, following the dawn of Wisconsin's statehood, the Menominee were completely stripped of lands in the newly formed state and were supposed to move to a tiny, barren reservation in Crow Wing, Minnesota. However, Menominee leaders fought this decision and were allowed to stay in Wisconsin. By 1856, the 1,950-member tribe was living on a 230,400-acre reservation out of their once massive base of land.

Once "settled" on the reservation, the tribe began to harvest lumber for their own use, as well as to sell off the reservation. From 1870 through the early 20th century, the Menominee battled against Wisconsin's "Pine Ring Barons" who constantly sought control of the tribe's valuable timber. The tribe refused to give in to the Pine Ring, seeing the destruction of the land and wishing to preserve the health of the forest and the people for generations to come. During this time period, the Menominee were also fighting an uphill battle with government authorization to harvest timber. Permission was continually granted, only to be revoked a few months or years later. The Menominee tribe could not sustain the people or maintain the health of the forest without a guaranteed harvest by the government.

The LaFollette Act:
On March 28, 1908, Congress and the Menominee joined hands to legally manage and preserve the forest and as a result sustain the Menominee people. Wisconsin Senator LaFollette championed this act, working with the Menominee tribe to create a binding act that would "preserve and perpetuate the forest" for all generations. The Act authorized the cutting, manufacture, and sale of timber in a sustainable manner. Only mature and ripened green timber was to be harvested at a maximum of 20 million board feet per year, plus any dead or downed timber. Mills and other equipment were to be provided for the tribe. The passing of this Act by Congress marked a new era in Menominee forestry, an era of self-management and sustenance.

The Trials:
The signing of the LaFollette Act, all though a huge step forward, did not mark the end of the struggles for the Menominee people. Corrupt government Indian agents and mismanagement caused squandered profits and massive amounts of timber wasted. In 1903, 40 million board feet of timber rotted onsite due to fraud and incompetence in the salvage operations. As a result, the Menominee filed a lawsuit against the State Forestry Service and took the battle for preservation of their forest into the courtroom.

The largest trial for the Menominee people began in 1928 when the Meriam Report labeled the Menominee as one of many tribes "eligible" for termination. Termination was a way for the US government to escape the "Indian business" by relinquishing all trust obligations. On June 17, 1954, Public Law 83-599 was passed by Congress terminating Menominee tribal status. Land became privately owned, the reservation became Menominee County subjected to state law and jurisdiction. The Menominee had been one of the wealthiest tribes in the US, but taxes quickly depleted this wealth. Menominee activists, led by Ada Deer, battled for tribal status to be reinstated. Finally, on December 22, 1979, President Nixon signed the Menominee Restoration Bill, reinstating Menominee Tribal status.

The Future:
The Menominee Tribe remains dedicated in protecting the forest, sustaining the people, and helping to reduce negative impacts on the Earth and the ecosystem. Research is currently being done on investing in and building a Biomass addition to the mill. Menominee Tribal Enterprises continues to look for new ways to utilize "waste" products and to utilize all parts of the trees harvested, emulating traditional practices. The Menominee Tribe will continue to protect, preserve, and sustain the forest and the people for generations to come, as dictated by tribal leaders more than a century ago.

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