Historical Background

In 1921, the Federal Power Commission granted the Wisconsin-Minnesota Power Company the rights to construct Project 108 on the Chippewa River. The purpose of this project was to create a water reservoir that could be controlled via dam in order to control water levels for power production downstream. Although the project seems straightforward, it attracted controversy due to the fact that the land to be flooded included a portion of the Chippewa River that was the ancestral home of the Lac Courte Oreilles Band of Lake Superior Chippewa Indians which had been guaranteed to the Tribe in an 1854 treaty with the United States Government. Project 108, also known as Winter Dam, was constructed with a license of 50 years despite vehement and almost unanimous objections of the Lac Courte Oreilles based on their ancestral ways.

The increasing water level had many detrimental effects on the land. Water swallowed the village of Post, buried ancestral burial grounds underwater, destroyed wild rice fields, and affected the ecosystem of the area. In many cases, the terms of the original license, which included compensation, the creation of a new village, and moving burial grounds were either done halfheartedly or ignored altogether by the power company, now the Northwestern States Power Company. In the 50-year-period of the dam’s license, new laws and regulations, claims by the Tribe that the power company had not followed the terms of the original license, and the numerous damages done to the reservation all became major issues when Project 108 became due for relicensing. The grievances of the Lac Courte Oreilles towards this project and the Northwestern States Power Company culminated in 13 years of trials, debates, and discussions that all tried to resolve the future of Winter Dam as well as give the Tribe a chance to search for adequate compensation.

The Plight of Wild Rice

The focus of this research process is on the environmental effects of Project 108, specifically the effects on wild rice. Before the construction of Winter Dam, the Lac Courte Oreilles grew approximately 25,000 pounds annually. To the Tribe, this production had several key purposes. The growing of wild rice had religious significance and wild rice played a key role in almost every religious ceremony and was central in their beliefs, culture, and society in general. In addition, the sale of wild rice was the main source of economic income for the Tribe as well as their main source of nutrition. The importance of wild rice to the Chippewa in this area cannot be exaggerated and for this reason became the main argument of the Native Americans against relicensing. After the creation of Project 108, the production of wild rice was completely annihilated. From 25,000 pounds, the Lac Courte Oreilles were unable to produce any on their own lands. The only compensation for this change was granting small portions of land separate from the reservation in order to continue producing wild rice. It took Tribe members three days to hike to the site, which made it a completely unsuitable substitute. The people also refused to rely on paddy rice as they labeled it as an affront to the natural ways of rice production. Wild rice production was far more than a subsistence activity; it lay at the heart of the religion and culture of the Lac Courte Oreilles. During the 13 years of proceedings surrounding the question of relicensing, wild rice became a central issue in any suggested solution as well as for compensations for past injustices. Numerous environmental surveys explored how best to create a solution that allowed wild rice to be grown on the reservation once again and how to best guarantee the dam would not interfere at least with these specific areas. Through our research into the legal battle between the Lac Courte Oreilles and the Northern States Power Company, we hope to be able to tell the story of how deep an impact environmental change can make on a group of people.

In August of 1971, the American Indian Movement, a Native American activist group, joined with the Lac Courte Oreilles to protest the relicensing of Winter Dam. The AIM participated in numerous demonstrations since their founding in 1968 and supported the Band throughout the lengthy issue of relicensing. This photograph shows two children at a demonstration on the reservation during the protests from August 1-3. Courtesy of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin.

Winter Dam flooded over 500 acres of land on the Lac Courte Oreilles Reservation. Varying water levels destroyed pieces of the land and dramatically changed the environment. This image depicts clear-cut logging done to remove trees before they were destroyed by flood waters. This photograph demonstrates a small portion of this destruction. Courtesy of the Northern States Power Company.

The Winter Dam was approved in 1921 and built from 1922-1923. This image shows the construction from the west bank of the Chippewa River. Photograph from the Northern States Power Company.

This print shows Native Americans harvesting wild rice using the traditional method. Courtesy of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin.