



Molly Neptune Parker, a Passamaquoddy, shows a basket made from the ash tree.

photo: Maine Indian Basketmakers Alliance

Wabanaki Diplomacy

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Much can be learned from the way Wabanaki tribes deal with complex community challenges.

For the last six years, I have been one of the leaders of a project to protect Wabanaki basketmaking traditions, under threat from an invasive species called emerald ash borer.¹ Our project studies and facilitates the ways that Wabanaki basketmakers, tribes, state and federal foresters, university researchers, landowners, and others work together to prevent, detect, and respond to the potentially devastating emerald ash borer as it moves east toward Maine, devouring trees. Central to the process is the use of Wabanaki diplomacy, a multinational, multicultural, indigenous form of diplomacy that emphasizes relationships to solve potential disputes.

History

Wabanaki basketmaking—an economic, cultural, and spiritual tradition—uses brown or black ash trees (*fraxinus nigra*) as the primary source material. That is why the emerald ash borer's appearance in 2013 in New Hampshire, Maine's next-door neighbor, raised alarms.

As with other ecological threats, multiple ways of comprehending the problem had to be brought to the table. Regulators use purely economic measurements when a resource is being impacted by an invasive species and tend to work with industry on quarantines and certification for enforcement. Basketmakers, although also concerned about the economic impacts, consistently raise cultural and historical concerns, reminding scientists and regulators about the trouble tribe members already have with access to basketmaking materials and reminding them of indigenous rights. At the same



Stakeholders are uniting to fight the devastating emerald ash borer as it moves east toward Maine, devouring trees.

time, they use Wabanaki diplomacy to call attention to the sovereignty of everyone involved and work to fashion a cooperative approach to problem solving.

Wabanaki diplomacy is multifaceted and calls upon a system of meanings that have arisen over centuries. The Wabanaki Confederacy—a multinational cultural and political alliance between the Penobscots, Passamaquoddies, Abenakis, Maliseets, and Micmacs of Maine and the Canadian maritime provinces—was first organized to affirm common ideals and respond to pressures introduced by the arrival of Europeans.

When I first started to consider how modern Wabanaki diplomacy functions, I was struck by how similar the issues and tone of 18th and 19th century diplomatic speeches and petitions were to contemporary Native American claims for rights, especially in regard to natural resources. The themes of current diplomatic articulations are like the strategies Native Americans employed to respond to colonization. They involve control over and knowledge of resources, the importance of treaty rights, and the necessity of honoring past promises.

Basket by Jeremy Frey, a Passamaquoddy craftsman.



Throughout the 18th century, many of the agreements of peace were clear attempts by Wabanaki people to stop incursion of Europeans into their lands and resources. By the 19th century, the ability to use natural resources, guaranteed in treaties, was the main focus of Wabanaki diplomacy. The Petition from the Chiefs of the Penobscot Tribe to the Governor of Maine and the Executive Council, January 26, 1821, is an example. (See “We the Undersigned.”)

The idea was not to regulate Indians and non-Indians differently but to suggest that people who know the resources best might be best at implementing a management program.

A Modern Example

Over the last two years, as I have helped to coordinate a series of memoranda of understanding (MOUs) between the Wabanaki Nations in Maine and federal and state agencies regulating forest pests, I have seen the importance of respect for differing values and knowledge again and again.

In our work to prevent the emerald ash borer from pass-

ing through New Hampshire into Maine, Wabanaki diplomacy has been central to understanding how different cultural groups come together to solve an issue involving land, power, and natural resources.

The approach involves respecting the different values and kinds of knowledge that each group brings to the situation. Going into this process, we understood that different approaches and forms of knowledge might be a challenge, so we made sure that the overarching questions for our meetings could be answered from a variety of perspectives. For example, in the early stages of meeting in 2009 and 2010, we asked all of the constituents, which included scientists, regulators, basketmakers, and resource gatherers, what they wanted to know more about and what was their highest priority. Together the group came up with four key areas: mapping ash resources, developing policy guidance, educating the public, and collecting seeds.

Researchers and regulators could rely on mapping and other forms of spatial and statistical data. But the level of detail they could offer was small compared with the specific knowledge that resource gatherers possessed—particularly how they used the context of other trees in the forest to help determine site location for basket-quality ash.

Because the goals were initially defined by everyone, potentially conflicting viewpoints were addressed in a way that left a space open for recognition of Wabanaki points of view and the legitimacy of their knowledge and engagement with the resources.

Being Prepared

A primary issue in Maine is what will happen if the emerald ash borer is discovered on or adjacent to tribal lands, and how the different parties will work together to study, regulate, and address the pest's impact on tribal and nontribal resources.

In our research, other states have done very little to include tribal lands, peoples, and governments in the process of responding to the ash borer. In Maine, we were determined to make sure they would be included from the beginning.

The ongoing negotiations for agreements have revealed what we would already expect from the recognition and legitimacy of Wabanaki knowledge, experience, and diplomacy: differences are being worked out. Tribal governments' and basketmakers' initial concerns that they would not be consulted if a discovery happened near tribal lands—and that they would not be included in studying

the impact and the extent of the infestation—are being addressed. The same is true for federal regulators' concerns that an infestation on or near tribal lands needed to be quickly studied and dealt with.

Embedded in the MOUs is a recognition of Wabanaki knowledge regarding the harvesting and protection of brown ash resources as well as a proper process to include the different parties in a thoughtful and respectful way in a potentially tense situation. For those of us involved in the process, Wabanaki diplomacy, with its emphasis on participation and multiple forms of knowledge, guided the way to an open and easy exchange between people with different levels of formal and informal education and different cultural, practical, and scientific knowledge.

It seems obvious that being able to define and articulate your own understanding of a sustainable world, or the public good, is a critical aspect of self-determination—and that this is what most indigenous peoples and other cultural minorities are seeking. It is often difficult, however, for Native people to articulate their slightly different conception of the good under the current US arrangements for tribal sovereignty. The loss is not theirs alone, as the old ways of engaging through diplomacy and cultural knowledge could benefit the dominant culture as well.

In our preparation to take on the ash borer, recognition of tribal and basketmaker commitment to the resource was remarked upon by a number of scientists and regulators. This is not to say that the scientists and regulators were surprised. It was more that they felt they were finally in what they considered to be the right room, talking to the right people. The values and commitments of indigenous people were recognized, and the experts were able to let go of the idea that they were the only ones with good processes and knowledge to address a problem.

The successful collaboration on the ash borer issue suggests that an understanding of Native notions of the good can benefit the wider community, especially in terms of creating partnerships to promote sustainability.

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Endnote

¹ Wabanaki means “people of the dawn.”

