
Akwesasne Mohawk: Meet the People

Maxine Cole, Teacher, Akwesasne Freedom School: (Mohawk language) is the “Words Before All Else.” Those are the things that are said when you get up in the morning. And, you know, you wake up and you say (Mohawk language). I’m still living, I still have life. And, then you start to acknowledge all those things around us that have life too. And so it starts from the very, from the people, and then the ground, up into the sky, and that’s about giving thanks to all that the Creator has given us.

(Iroquois music playing)

Narrator: The Mohawk people have lived in what is now central and eastern New York for many centuries. Everything they needed came from the plants, animals, waters, and other natural resources around them. The Thanksgiving Address is a way that many traditional Akwesasne Mohawk people show gratitude for what they’ve been given.

Ernest Benedict, Mohawk elder: Now we have gathered together to put our minds together as one. We see that all the surrounding signs of life continue and are faithfully performing the tasks that have been given to them by the Creator. And some are food, some are medicines, and some are a delight to the eye.

Narrator: The Thanksgiving Address expresses an important relationship between the people and all things in the natural world.

Aronhiaies Herne, Principal, Akwesasne Freedom School: So, it’s important that people understand that these things are gifts. You know, the trees and the birds and the grasses—all the natural world, it’s all a gift that was given to us to help us to survive.

Narrator: Even so, the Mohawk people who live on the Akwesasne reservation are dealing with strains on the environment that affect both their homelands and their culture. Mohawk people are well known for the baskets they make from black ash trees. These baskets have long been important to the Mohawks economically and culturally. Basketmaking is one important way Mohawk people keep their culture alive today.

Sue Ellen Herne, Program Coordinator, Akwesasne Museum: A lot of basketmakers in Akwesasne are still making baskets, and it’s part of their livelihood and it’s a continuing part of our culture.



Henry Arquette, Mohawk Basketmaker: Well, actually, it was passed on from generation. My grandfather made baskets, and when my father retired from working, well even before he retired, he started making baskets, and that's how I got started.

Sue Ellen Herne: Mohawk basketry is black-ash splint basketry. This is a basket in progress, and it's made by harvesting black ash logs, and then the logs are pounded to separate the logs where the annual growth rings are. Once they're separated, they're rolled into bundles and can be stored. And when the basketmaker is ready to use them, they soak them and split them into thinner layers. And we're known for a lot of different curls—all throughout the Northeast, not just Mohawk people but other Northeastern Native people use black ash splint and are known for intricate curls and fancy baskets.

Narrator: Both in the past and today, black ash trees are used for medicines and to make many useful things.

Richard David, Mohawk Basketmaker and Assistant Director, Department of Environment, Mohawk Council of Akwesasne: Yeah, there are some medicinal uses out of black ash. I think the tea from here is good, like you can make the tea and drink it anytime, because it helps your whole system.

Narrator: Black ash trees, once common in Mohawk lands, are now dwindling. Overharvesting and environmental changes threaten these trees, but the biggest problem they face is the possibility of insect infestation.

Richard David: We've got this little bug that's headed our way; it's already been devastating much of the ash stands in Michigan and Ontario. And a lot of different states around the Michigan area have been devastated by emerald ash borer.

Les Benedict, Assistant Director, Environment Division, Saint Regis Mohawk Tribe: These are the actual insects that were removed from infested trees. You can see they are very small, and they are part of a family of beetles that are called the jewel beetles. They are very shiny, metallic looking, and they're iridescent green. They're a really nice-looking insect, but they are very harmful.

Richard David: If the emerald ash borer moves in and wipes everything out, we're going to lose a big part of our culture. We won't have any more material for making baskets, and that's going to be a very difficult time.

Narrator: By working to protect the black ash trees, Mohawk people are also working to protect their culture.

Maxine Cole: You have got to take responsibility. It doesn't matter what the next person does or doesn't do, it's about what you do. And that's really important.