
Akwesasne Mohawk: Our Strategies

Narrator: The Mohawk community has created the Akwesasne Task Force on the Environment to deal with their environmental issues. They are working hard to protect the community's black ash tree population.

Les Benedict, Assistant Director, Environment Division, Saint Regis Mohawk Tribe: It takes about 40 to 50 years to get a good-sized tree; we're talking maybe about 16 inches. So, we're going to monitor these trees over a period of time and were going to monitor for their growth. The objective here was to remove some of the competing trees. And, so part of our effort is to get regeneration because some of these trees you see might be 30 years old and they will never make a good basket tree. And so, we focus some of our attention on regeneration, to try to get things, get the newer stuff coming in.

Richard David, Mohawk Basketmaker and Assistant Director, Department of Environment, Mohawk Council of Akwesasne: And TreeAzin is a chemical that we inject into the trunks of the tree, into the cambium layer, and that stuff moves up into the canopy and it makes the tree sort of distasteful for the emerald ash borer, so they tend to leave those trees alone. But we went through all kinds of testing before we wanted to use the TreeAzin, because the basketmakers, when they're working with the basket, their third hand is often their teeth, so they put the splint in their mouth. So we want to make sure there are no chemicals in it that would harm the basketmakers. And what we discovered is that the chemical in it is similar to dish detergent.

Narrator: Through management of the black ash, the Mohawks are able to support the existing tree population and work to ensure that trees continue to grow in the future. Both of these approaches begin with collecting seeds from existing trees.

Richard David: Seed collecting is, I guess you could say, is an art in itself because it does take, it's a lot of, takes a lot of physical work to get at the seeds because most of the seeds are up 20, 30, 40 feet up in the tree.

Les Benedict: These are . . . this is a black ash seed. It's winged completely from one end to the other. This happens to be the seed pod or the seed case, or embryo. If we open that up, you can actually see the seed that's in there. And, that's the seed.

Narrator: As a solution, the Akwesasne Task Force on the Environment has focused on collecting and storing black ash seeds each year. If the emerald ash borer kills all the black ash trees, these stored seeds will be used to reintroduce the tree later.



Les Benedict: This is a seed orchard we established back in 1993. And, it has produced a lot of seeds. I think we had 15 trees that were started, and so we planted them here as a seed orchard. They start producing seeds at 9 years of age and these are 16 years old now.

Richard David: We've been collecting seeds now, maybe 18, 20 years. And, we've collected seeds all over this area and in Canada, from Manitoba down into Quebec, and Michigan on this side down through here.

Narrator: An important part of their strategy is community education and involvement.

Richard David: We had this project called the Greening of Akwesasne, where we would purchase seedlings from a number of different nurseries, give...have a tree giveaway in the community where people would come and take the trees and plant them. And we would go to the elders and help them with the planting and everything. Put trees in the ground.

Bob Stevenson, Department of Environment, Mohawk Council of Akwesasne: It's a big effort for the whole community to come and pick the trees, even in their own yards, planting trees within their own yards. And black ash is part of it. We have a lot of spots within the community that is wetlands. So we've managed to, you know, plant a bunch of trees there.

Richard David: We've spent a lot of time in the last few years trying to educate people about not moving firewood, and just burn it where you get it and not to move the bug.

Narrator: The restoration project has been an overwhelming success, and its record of accomplishment has made it a role model for other communities.

Les Benedict: Our, I guess, our orders or our mandates came from our community elders, who asked us to bring back black ash to the community. And, we work directly with our elders; we work directly with our basketmakers—the people that use the resources—to develop plans for managing the resource. So they have been an integral part of what we have been doing. If it weren't for them, we probably wouldn't even be standing here today.