

ASH TREES, INDIAN COMMUNITIES AND THE EMERALD ASH BORER

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North American Indians of the Great Lakes region (Anishnaabek, Haudenosaunee and others) have long standing relationships with each species of ash tree found in the region. These trees have been used historically in a variety of applications, most notably for constructing black ash baskets (or *kokibinaagnan* in Anishnaabe). Great Lakes Indians have accumulated intimate knowledge over the course of countless generations about where to find ash trees, how to support their growth and development and how to use them in practical and artistic applications. Ash trees continue to be used by North American Indians for many different purposes including for firewood, snowshoes, hunting and fishing decoys, canoe paddles lumber, and baskets. Not every Indian from the Great Lakes region holds in-depth knowledge about ash trees. However, those individuals who do hold such knowledge have been taught about ash by their relatives through hands-on, place-based learning. Their understanding of ash trees and forest ecosystems comes from a centuries-old intergenerational accumulation of knowledge and is referred to as “traditional ecological knowledge.”

Within Indian communities, the people who hold the greatest amount of knowledge about black ash (*wiiskaak*) and the forested wetlands where these trees reside are the black ash basket makers. Basket making traditions are maintained within a relatively small number of Indian families. Members of these families are very knowledgeable about *wiiskaak* distribution and ecology and are highly motivated to preserve ash trees and the art of basket making. Tribal and first nation natural resource managers and cultural programming specialists are also knowledgeable about ash resources and are aware of the specific people in their communities who use ash for basket making and other purposes.

In the scientific community, black ash is one of the least studied and least understood ash species. The invasion of emerald ash borer into North American forests provided an impetus for scientific investigation of all forest types supporting ash species

including northern and southern swamps where black ash resides. It also provides an opportunity for collaboration between policy makers, scientists and traditional knowledge holders such as basket makers. Considering the historic lack of attention paid to black ash and forested wetlands by scientists, researchers interested in black ash could gain critical insights from basket makers who know this tree and its habitat well.

Problem solving efforts benefit from diverse work groups because linking multiple perspectives helps illuminate a more complete picture of the “system” of interest. North American Indians bring unique perspectives and information to the emerald ash borer conversation that can complement those of Western scientists and policy makers. If you are working on an emerald ash borer project, consider connecting with traditional basket makers because they hold many generations worth of traditional ecological knowledge relevant to your project. Also consider working with staff from tribal and first nation natural resource and cultural offices. We are all interested in protecting ash trees from a fate similar to American chestnut or American elm, and it is critical that tribal, first nation, federal, state, nonprofit and private entities all work together to devise management strategies that will diminish this prolific forest pest.