

Logging the Great Lakes Indian Reservations: The Case of the Bad River
Band of Ojibwe

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We investigate the Ojibwe experience of the logging era in the Great Lakes region (ca. 1860-1925) through a historical case study of forest management on the Bad River reservation, located in northern Wisconsin. Although primary forest clearance reshaped ecological, cultural, and political landscapes throughout the region, the Ojibwe experienced the logging era in ways that differed from their white neighbors. As treaty-defined land cessions catalyzed changes to the Bad River livelihood and economy, reservation forests took on a new meaning: the stands became the primary source of untapped capital for the band and the Indian Agency. In accordance with the fiducial responsibility of tribal trust doctrine, the Indian Agency was charged to manage reservation forest resources for the long-term benefit of tribal members. Harvest of the Bad River stands (ca. 1894-1922) produced 1.25-1.5 billion board feet of pine, other softwood, and hardwood timber, valued at approximately \$7 million. And yet, Bad River reservation forests were largely depleted by 1925, while generating minimal lasting return for tribal members. We investigate why this failure occurred at Bad River. Our study revealed multiple reasons: 1) upheaval of the traditional Ojibwe economy, which degenerated into a timber dependent economy; 2) ineffective supervision of Indian agents by senior Indian Agency officials; 3) corruption by the designated timber contractor, which was tolerated by the Indian Office; 4) Indian Agency assumptions that Ojibwe culture should be reshaped to fit the model of Anglo-American settled agriculture. During the early 20th century, the agency vacillated between forestry practices designed to maximize economic return and those characteristic of scientific forestry, thus demonstrating its competing resource management objectives. These twin goals—conserving forests for the future and cutting forests to hasten assimilation—conflicted with one another, and the result was disastrous for both the Bad River reservation forest and economy.

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