

Protecting Black Ash from the Emerald Ash Borer

Les Benedict

Les Benedict is the Assistant Director of the St Regis Mohawk Tribe and the Black Ash Project Coordinator for the Akwesasne Task Force on the Environment, 412 State Route 37, Akwesasne, NY 13655; Tel: 518.358.5937; E-mail: les.benedict@srmt-nsn.gov.

Benedict L. 2010. Protecting black ash from the emerald ash borer. In: Riley LE, Pinto JR, Dumroese RK, technical coordinators. National Proceedings: Forest and Conservation Nursery Associations—2009. Proc. RMRS-P-62. Fort Collins, CO: USDA Forest Service, Rocky Mountain Research Station: 1-2. Online: http://www.fs.fed.us/rm/pubs/rmrs_p062.html.

Abstract: Black ash (*Fraxinus nigra*) is an important resource for Tribes in the Northeast and Great Lakes regions of the North American continent. Ash in North America is being threatened with widespread destruction as a result of the introduction of emerald ash borer beetle (*Agrilus planipennis*) in 2002. Measures are being taken to slow the spread of emerald ash borer beetle. Unless proactive measures are taken to secure black ash supplies, however, Native American basket makers stand to lose their only source of materials. One potential action is the establishment of shelter populations of black ash in geographically isolated areas of the country.

Keywords: basketry, medicinal plants, *Fraxinus nigra*

Background

Black ash (*Fraxinus nigra*) is an important non-timber forest product utilized by the Mohawks of Akwesasne in making splint baskets. The tree is also an important medicine plant used by traditional healers to treat a range of maladies. Mohawks prize the black ash because its annual growth rings are easily separated by hitting the bolt with a heavy mallet or back of an axe. After being peeled from the log, the splints are smoothed, split, cut to width, and woven into baskets. Once woven, the black ash splints become dry and sturdy, producing durable products (utility baskets) used for hunting, fishing, and gathering. Mohawk basket makers also produce ornamental baskets that reflect strawberries, corn, and traditional symbols in their weaves. The ornamental baskets interweave “sweet grass” for adornment and aesthetic appeal because the grass is highly fragrant. Black ash baskets are used in traditional ceremonies such as weddings, where the man and woman exchange baskets containing goods symbolizing how they will care for one another and their family. Black ash basketry is also an important subsistence industry for many Mohawks who depend on basket sales for income to purchase food and other necessities.

The introduction of the emerald ash borer beetle (*Agrilus planipennis*) (EAB) from Asia threatens all ash species in North America and Native American black ash basketry. Federal and state agencies have been studying EAB and have developed some hopeful controls, but it continues to spread through the eastern states despite firewood and nursery material quarantines.

While the pest and forest management experts have been studying impacts and evaluating controls, Native Americans are concerned about the long-term prospects for black ash needed to sustain basketry. Discussions have included harvest and long-term storage of black ash materials from existing supplies. Storage options may include debarking and dry storage or submerged storage. The most apparent issue associated with storage options is space and location.

Another option includes establishing and managing plantations of ash as an agri-forestry enterprise. Plantations will minimize costs for pest controls even though they may in fact become a sink for insects such as EAB.

For either option, logistics, costs, and feasibility must be examined. The main point is that while agencies struggle with the expanding EAB infestation and play catch-up in learning about the insect and how best to control it, the future of Mohawk basketry in its present form is doubtful.

Proposal

An appeal was made before the Intertribal Nursery Council to determine the level of interest by Native American participants in establishing shelter populations of black ash as a means of maintaining a supply of trees to be used for basket-making materials. To date, some stands have been established on islands in the St Lawrence River and on Martha's Vineyard, MA for restoration projects. These may serve as models for shelter populations should EAB be prevented from being spread to these places by controlling access to them. There is a report that the Mic Mac people on Prince Edward Island are restoring black ash to the island. This presents an opportunity to maintain black ash for basket-making materials and genetic stock as well.

Opportunities may exist to grow black ash (and also white ash [*Fraxinus americana*]) in the Pacific Northwest regions, such as Oregon and Washington, on commercial scales to produce basket materials for Mohawks. Many questions need to be answered regarding such a proposal, including investment, cost, feasibility, and, most important, the quality of black ash trees produced on the new landscape to which they are introduced.

Summary_____

The purpose of my presentation was to illuminate the severity of impact due to EAB on Mohawk culture and traditional practices, as well as to highlighting the tremendous economic impact soon to be realized as a result of EAB infestation and spread. While experts work on control of EAB, concerns for having long-term access to black ash supplies need to be addressed. A request was put forth to attendees who may be interested in establishing shelter populations of black ash to supply materials for Mohawk basket makers.