



Wiigobaatig (Basswood tree)

Harvesting and usage of wiigobaatig at Waswagoning Re-Created Ojibwe village

By Nicole Larsen
For Mazina'igan

Lac du Flambeau, Wis.—Nick Hockings, a Lac du Flambeau tribal elder and owner of the Waswagoning Re-Created Ojibwe Village, went looking to harvest basswood trees in an off reservation site. He stopped at a nearby DNR station where he hoped to be guided to an appropriate location. To his dismay the ranger said, "The basswood tree is one of the most useless trees in the forest." Within a few hundred years the importance of the basswood tree went from extremely valuable to one of the least important commercial wood product harvested in the northwoods.

Hockings soon realized that certain natural resources are more important to First Nation peoples than to the greater society. Their importance lies in their traditional uses. Basswood is one resource that remains very important to the Ojibwe of the Great Lakes region.

According to Hockings, it remains a necessity in his life and a colossal part of his livelihood at Waswagoning. By way of watching and learning ("gikinawaabiwin"—by way of watching and learning), Hockings has learned many traditional uses of the basswood bark. Hockings says, "The Waswagoning Re-Created Village commonly uses the basswood bark for many traditional items, such as, the tying of wigwam poles,

fish drying racks, fish traps, the lacing together of birch bark for baskets. It also has an exceptional use in fire making. The inner bark as well as other materials is used as the dry, flammable material that hosts the hot ash; the branches are used for the spindles and the wood for the fireboards."

Basswood is a special tree that traditionally was said to be very important to the Ojibwe people. Not only was it used in the day-to-day lives of our ancestors, but it also has medicinal purposes. It is believed by many that the inner bark of the basswood tree was used to treat dysentery. The twigs were used for lung problems, and the leaves helped to treat burns.

In the Great Lakes region, the basswood tree often reaches heights of 80 feet. They are known to sprout after a fire or cutting. The basswood tree is a very difficult tree to find in the forest. They tend to grow in clumps of several trunks in a moist, deciduous forest. They grow nearby elm trees, and red and white oaks. Typically, young basswood trees have very large, heart-shaped leaves. Those leaves are usually 3-4 times larger than trees its size. When the basswood tree is young, the bark is smooth on the outside. It is usually light grey in color. When the tree gets older, the bark gets rough or furrowed and the leaves get smaller. Small flowers appear in June-July after the leaves have grown. The flowers have five yellowish and white

fuzzy petals. It is said these flowers were used for tea.

The basswood bark loosens up on the trees around the middle of May-July. The first part of June is said to be one of the best time to harvest, when the basswood bark is the easiest to peel off of the tree ("bisha 'igobi"—to peel basswood). Some people recommend that the best trees to harvest are the ones that are about 5-6 inches in diameter.

To begin the harvesting process, start by girdling the tree, which is making a cut all the way around the base of the tree. Then begin by pulling 1-3 inch strips up the entire length of the tree. At the top you have to pop the strips off of the tree. Once you strip the bark off a basswood tree, it will kill the tree. So Hockings recommends not wasting any of the tree.

After harvesting the basswood bark, the tree will dry out and die. The dried out tree will be easier to find the following year, and you can cut it down. You can also use it for firewood or other uses such as tools for fire making, wood for decoys and much more.

After obtaining the basswood bark strips, you can roll them up for long or short term storage.

The most common method of harvesting the inner bark of the basswood tree is to peel the inner bark off immediately from the outer bark after stripping

it from the tree. In this case a strong coarse fiber of inner bark will result. The inner bark will be approximately 1/16 inches thick. At this stage it is best used to make woven mats.

The other way of stripping the inner bark from the outer bark in a more leisurely manner is to soak the bark strips. Soaking the strips for just a couple of days will leave the strips quite thick, but it is easier to separate the inner bark from the outer bark.

After separating the two barks, you can soak the inner bark alone. This time soak the inner bark strips for up to 2-3 weeks. This will help the bark strips to separate from each other into about 8-9 different thin layers. These thin layers can be used for sewing or as thread.

The Peterson family of Lac du Flambeau are known to make beautiful birch bark baskets. They periodically use a method where they boil the strips of the inner bark. This they find helps reduce the soaking time of 2-3 weeks.

After the soaking, you can let the inner bark strips dry out so you can make them into strong, durable rope, or you can use them for the lacing of birch bark baskets, coarsely woven bags, or reed mats.

Far from being worthless, the basswood remains a valued tree to the Ojibwe people who still recognize and use its many gifts.



Above Nick Hockings, Lac du Flambeau tribal member and owner of Waswagoning Re-Created Ojibwe Village, demonstrates how fibers extracted from wiigobaatig (basswood) can be separated to create a strong, thin thread, useful for tasks such as sewing birch bark. To the right, he demonstrates braiding wiigobaatig fibers to create a strong handle. (Photos by Nicole Larsen)



Wildlife harvest registration

(Continued from page 5)

Without your efforts in registration, the tribes would not be as successful in their struggles securing tribal jurisdiction over treaty-reserved rights. Don't look at registration as a pain, rather, look at it as your effort to support your tribe in its effort to secure tribal sovereignty.

When opponents to treaty rights claim that the tribes are killing all wildlife, then the data collected during registration can be used to counteract these claims. These harvest data have been used in federal court to prove that tribes can manage their own resources. This is very powerful information.

So next time you go to your registration station and get loaded up with tags, permits and regulations, remember your efforts are much appreciated. It is you, the harvester, who is providing the data needed to correctly manage wildlife. It is your registration efforts which can help the tribes stand up to the state and demand that they do things better. It is your information which is so very useful in the battle against anti-treaty rights groups.