

Wabanaki Forests: Identity, Cultural Connections, and a Call for New Collaborations

by Micah A. Pawling

In every seed resides a spirit.

—ssipsis (Penobscot, 1941–2015)
(ssipsis 2007)

For ethnohistorians, “Wabanaki forests” have a long presence in the Dawnland, referring to life before European arrival and survival during the colonial wars, to the last two centuries when Native people strove to retain access, knowledge, and use of their forest lands.¹ Wabanaki people in the past as well as today possess their own views on forest lands that are quite distinct from those of their Euro-American neighbors. Policymakers need to consider the significance of tribal forest history to shape appropriate and effective decisions today. Moreover, the incorporation of cultural worldviews and varied human values about ecosystems is an important component to cross-cultural policy formation. While the colonization of Wabanaki homelands serves as an important context in cross-cultural relationships today, to over emphasize the dramatic outcome of settler colonialism—generally defined as the various impacts of European or later Euro-American motivations and actions on Wabanaki homelands—can dangerously obscure Indigenous persistence, motivations, and perspectives (Peace 2023).

In the early 20th century, Penobscot Newell Lion shared a traditional story about grasshopper who hoarded all the tobacco. When the cultural hero

Gluskabe learned from grandfather Woodchuck that grasshopper inhabited a big island, Gluskabe built a canoe that glided as far as one could see, but it did not reach the island. When he made a second canoe, it coasted “two looks.” Finally, on the last attempt, Gluskabe built a third canoe that went “three looks” and safely landed on the island. The unit of measure called “a look” provides valuable insights into Penobscot spatial perceptions of their cultural homeland. As one might imagine, the distance of a look would vary depending on one’s location. On open water, a look consisted of about one league or almost three and a half miles. Natural occurrences such as fog could drastically change this measurement. In the woods, a look is estimated at about 200 yards, but after European arrival that led to the clear cutting of timber lands, a look drastically increased, allowing one to see further than ever before (Speck 1918).

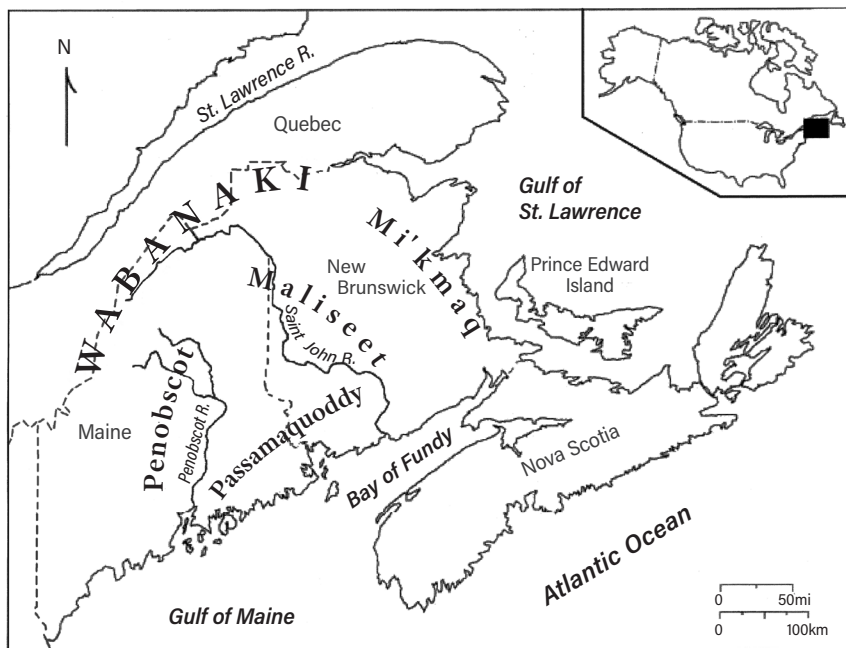
While this response essay on Wabanaki forests is in an agreement on the different status of tribal lands in Maine, sovereignty issues over the land are not merely a distraction to the formation of a more effective forest management (Irland 2025). Instead, it is part of a long struggle that Wabanaki people have had to engage in to retain their cultural connections to forest lands in their homeland. Sovereignty is an essential component to tribal lands and overlaps with Indigenous resource decisions. Wabanaki values on forest

lands are tied to their identity as Native people and are also in response to the challenges of colonization. They have embraced healthy forests as prime locations for cultural practices like hunting and fishing, but at the same time have chosen to implement their own wood-harvesting policies in selected areas. These forests represent a key characteristic of Wabanaki homeland, one that their ancestors may have recognized, despite centuries of Euro-American settlement dependent upon the forest for economic gain.

In many ways, the scale of Europeans clearing the land of trees for settlement and profit must have been disorientating for Wabanaki peoples. Forests were more than simply resources to be harvested. Although Maine residents may derive some identity from forests today, for the Wabanaki, forest ecosystems recalled creation stories and a deep sense of place that their ancestors knew for several thousands of years (Basso 1996). Brown ash (*Fraxinus nigra*) was not only used for basket splints, but also reminded people of the origin story told by Passamaquoddy Molly Sepsis. Koluscap shot an arrow into the tree and out walked the people who emerged from its bark (Leland 1884).² Some Wabanaki oral traditions about human and animal relations recount how specific tree species played vital roles in actions and decisions. Gluskabe used a large yellow birch tree (*Betula alleghaniensis*) to squash Ugulubemo, a giant bullfrog, who once withheld all the water. The bullfrog’s destruction led to the formation of the Penobscot River and the various Penobscot families closely associated with specific aquatic animals (Dana et al. 2021; Speck 1940).

Wabanaki forests supported a quotidian world where seasonal mobility

FIGURE 1: Map of Wabanaki Homeland in the 19th and 20th Centuries



Note: This map shows tribal distribution across the Maritime Peninsula. Map by Stephen Bicknell, University of Maine.

was paramount (Pawling 2016). One of the most important species was white birch (*Betula papyrifera*), which can be easily identified with its white paper bark against the Maine landscape. Its rot-resistant bark offered many necessities. Families used the thicker winter bark gathered in the colder months for the construction of birchbark canoes and wigwams or conical houses. Canoe construction also required white cedar (*Thuja occidentalis*) for the ribs and gunwales, rock maple (*Acer saccharum*) for poles, and pine pitch (*Pinus strobus*) (along with bear fat) to waterproof canoe seams. Wabanakis used the thinner summer bark to make birchbark maps, fishing torches, or utensils such as bowls and storage containers (Butler and Hadlock 1957; Eckstorm 1932; Pawling et al. 2015; Speck and Dexter 1951, 1952). Thread for sewing bark seams required digging up spruce roots (*Picea mariana*) from the ground and

splicing the roots in half, both of which were laborious activities that required practice (Thoreau 1988). Weavers would harvest and boil the inner bark of American basswood (*Tilia americana*), known for its thinness and strength, to make textiles for pouches and sometimes to weave or braid into twine for tumplines or drag lines (Speck 1940). Basketmakers cut brown ash trees and systematically pounded the felled horizontal trunk with the poll end of an ax to loosen splints that could be peeled off the log (McMullen and Handsman 1987). Wabanakis knew and used the forests in their respective homelands for myriad purposes that reinforced and sustained community life.

Wabanaki people also relied on various forest tree and shrub species for medicinal value. In the early 20th century, anthropologist Frank G. Speck described the drying of important medicines in Penobscot homes. He wrote,

“Tied to the rafters; of the ceiling or hanging near the stove to dry, strings or bundles of roots, bark, and plants may be seen in nearly every house” (Speck 1915: 308). Women were often gifted in medicinal knowledge, which required not only sharp identification skills, but also good memories to locate multiple species. A mixture of white cedar leaves could reduce the swelling of hands or feet. Balsam fir (*Abies balsamea*) made into an ointment heals cuts, burns, and sores (Speck 1915). Forests are ideal habitats for certain shrubs with medicinal value. Among the Maliseets, ground hemlock, or American yew (*Taxus canadensis*), was used to stop blood clots or to relieve pain of childbirth (Wallis and Wallis 1957). Wabanaki forests contain a multitude of medicinal properties.

The lumber industry in Maine went hand in hand with Euro-American settlement. After the fraudulent 1833 land sale of the four upper townships in the interior, Penobscot lands consisted of the river islands where over a century of log drives congested the river and destroyed island shorelines. Downriver from the tribal seat of the Penobscot Nation (Old Town Island or present-day Indian Island), a series of mills hummed with activity as they used waterpower from the falls to cut and process logs into boards and shingles (Ives 1977; Pawling 2018; Wood 1961). In Downeast Maine, the Passamaquoddy also confronted colonial lumbering activities that leveled rich forests and choked rivers with sawdust. Ironically, the Passamaquoddy at Sipayik (Pleasant Point) petitioned the state for a woodlot because tribal elders needed firewood for survival (Pawling 2016). To the north, Motahkomikuk (Indian Township), the largest reservation in Maine, originally over 23,000 acres by treaty right, emerged as a target for Maine and New Brunswick residents who illegally

seized Indian timber (Pawling and Socktomah 2015). In 1868, Passamaquoddy Governor Newell Neptune, Lieutenant Governor Sockis Francis, and 33 other community members petitioned Maine to protect their township from

the ruthless Grasp of Careless lumbermen intent only for present Gain who devastate and destroy its forest growth under pretence [sic] of cutting only grown timber Take All. Within the last two years Taking hundreds of Thousands of Ash (for Hoops) our main dependence for baskets—the employment of our women[.] Also cutting all over our growing wood beyond a hope of redemption during this 40 or 50 years—It has now been held from us for a term of years and shipped[.] destroyed and Plundered. (Newell et al. 1868)³

The Maine Legislature did not pass the petitioners' request to preserve Passamaquoddy timber on Indian Township.

Penobscot and Passamaquoddy tribal representatives often hand-delivered petitions to the Maine governor. Maine is the only state in the country to have a long tradition of tribal representatives to the House of Representatives (Starbird 1983). Such face-to-face interactions in the halls of state government required different tactics. In 1887, Passamaquoddy tribal representative Louis Mitchell delivered a speech to the Maine Legislature in which he acknowledged the significance of tribal timber. He said:

Just consider, to-day, how many rich men there are in Calais, in St. Stephen, Milltown, Machias, East Machias, Columbia, Cherryfield, and other lumbering towns. We see a good many of them worth thousands and even millions of dollars. We ask ourselves how they make most of their money? [The] answer is, they make it on lumber or timber once owned

by the Passamaquoddy Indians. (Mitchell 1887: 7)

Euro-American settlement had an adverse effect on Wabanaki forests and threatened to sever essential forest ecosystems from the original inhabitants.

By the early 20th century, Passamaquoddy leaders at Motahkomikuk (Indian Township) needed to rely on their standing timber to feed their families. Basketmakers had to import brown ash from Aroostook County or New Brunswick, and railroad freight fees increased the overall cost to produce baskets (Gove 1919). In February 1925, Passamaquoddy Lieutenant Governor Edmund Tomah and three council members petitioned the Maine governor to make direct sales of lathe woodwork to assist families. Under most cases, economic transactions went through the Indian agent. The Passamaquoddy petitioners wanted to make their own decisions about direct sales of their woodwork rather than going through their agent. In addition to the scarcity of work, they explained there was

no market for hard wood or ax handles or baskets or we can not hunt[.] There are lots of families here which are from 8 to 10 in one family and what we get from our agent is from \$2.00 to \$3.00 a week, when a man has to buy [or] beg flour for \$1.60 it leave's very little left, and about all families are very hard up for food....all a man can do now is get his own wood to keep his children from freezing because our houses are in very bad condition. (Tomah 1925)⁴

State officials viewed timber revenue as a potential means to support Passamaquoddy families. From 1929 to 1932, the forestry commissioner oversaw the jurisdiction of Indian Affairs in Maine, a shift that indicated how fundamentally the state associated timber with Wabanaki people and that timber could be used to relieve

economic hardships (Proctor 1942). According to Indian Agent Justin E. Gove, tribal citizens received individual payments from timber sales in 1933. Instead of providing greater assistance to the two communities at Sipayik (Pleasant Point) and Motahkomikuk (Indian Township), the state paid less to the Passamaquoddy compared to their Penobscot neighbors. Wabanaki families who once traveled to different parts of the state for employment returned to their reservations. Gove wrote that the Great Depression

hit the Indian people harder than any other people in the State of Maine. There is practically no sales for their baskets and novelties which they manufacture and it is impossible for them to obtain work of any kind. If I, as their agent, ask a contractor for work which they are capable of doing, the answer is: "When we hire a man, it is a tax payer, and you will have to take care of the Indians as they are wards of the State, and we are not employing that class of laborers." (Gove 1933)

Wabanakis status as Indigenous people still living in their traditional but colonized homelands led to striking racism that persists today.

The abuses of colonialism and the long history of inequality between Wabanakis and Maine settlers highlight the need to incorporate Wabanaki values about their forests in cross-cultural collaborations between tribes and non-Natives on forest policy. The goals include the Indigenous priority of preserving these ecosystems whose value should not be measured simply as a timber and paper-making resource. Indigenous collaborators must be equal partners. Mutual respect leads to synergy, both of which require time, fortitude, and perseverance.

In the mid-20th century, Professor Arthur G. Randall of the University of

Maine's School of Forestry established forestry camps in Indian Township (Motahkomikuk). Researchers believed that the reservation was their laboratory and the ideal place for students to learn about wildlife and ways to prevent forest fires. While the aim was to manage the standing timber and increase its yield, tree reduction and environmental risk were more acceptable to state officials on an Indian reservation than elsewhere, especially if academics benefited (AP Newsfeatures 1949; Randall 1969). In truth, forest exploitation by settlers, the state, and university experts, along with questionable land transactions in Motahkomikuk (Indian Township), undermined traditional Passamaquoddy forest practices and threatened to erode tribal relationships with their land. At mid-century, Motahkomikuk experienced a distinct form of invasion through scientific forestry practices. Tree experiments deterred mature forests for hunting, dissuaded families from harvesting their own firewood, and a dam flooded shorelines and took further tribal land (*Bangor Daily News* 1912; Fixico 1998; Ghre 1984; Pike 1915; Soctomah 2002). One way to confront the outside forestry practices was to invest in Passamaquoddy foresters devoted to the protection of their lands, asserting that the whole community should benefit from forest decisions. Dispossession and continued threats of land loss required some Wabanakis to collaborate with individuals or organizations, including the Forest Society of Maine, to maintain and expand their biodiversity goals beyond tribal lands (FSM 2024).

In the 1960s, Passamaquoddy control over their Indian Township reservation was further eroded when the state of Maine permitted Georgia Pacific Lumber Company to aggressively cut standing timber. On July 4, 1968, a week after tribal leaders asked the company to

remove their harvesting equipment from their lands, 40 Passamaquoddy citizens sat in front of the logging skidders and trucks to protest the cutting of tribal timber. Passamaquoddy Chief of Indian Township John Stevens said, "They are using bulldozers and scraping the land barren. There won't be anything growing there in 200 years if we let them continue their present tactics" (Woodard 2014). Several days later, Georgia-Pacific agreed to the tribal demands to hire "all-Indian crews" and to gradually turn over cutting practices to the Passamaquoddy within 10 to 15 years" (Stevens 1978; *Telegraph-Journal* 1968). By the early 1970s, Motahkomikuk (Indian Township) looked like a patchwork, consisting of several lots that had fallen out of tribal ownership, all of which were a direct violation of treaty rights (Soctomah 2020).

Too often Wabanaki forest lands are dismissed because of their small size in comparison to large landowners. However, since the Maine Indian Claims Settlement Act of 1980 (hereafter, Settlement Act), Wabanaki lands in Maine have increased. Reservation lands, once secured by land treaties, are no longer the only type of Wabanaki lands. Trust lands purchased from unorganized territory in Maine's interior allow tribes to interact with new forests in their homelands. Similar to Euro-American residents, Wabanaki communities also own fee simple title to land parcels that permits access to important places that fall outside the unorganized territory requirement of the Settlement Act.⁵ As of January 2024, the Penobscot Nation has 4,865.88 acres of reservation land, 93,797.45 acres of trust lands, and 28,604.27 acres of fee lands, totaling 127,267.60 acres in Maine (Penobscot Nation 2024). While Wabanaki tribal lands have grown in Maine over the past half century, they are still a small fraction of the original extent of their

homelands. The Penobscot Nation has a harvesting program on certain trust and fee lands, but central to their forest management goals include the enhancement of "the current forests, wildlife habitat, water quality, and recreational opportunities."⁶

More recently, the *land back* movement further increases Wabanaki forest lands. It entails the consolidation of funds to repurchase lands for tribes or landowners transferring personal property to Wabanaki governance. A recent example is Kuwesuwi Monihq (Pine Island, later called White Island), a 120-acre site on Big Lake in Washington County. Once secured by the Passamaquoddy under the 1794 Treaty with Massachusetts, the island fell out of tribal ownership in the 19th century. This land return in 2021 not only increases the overall tribal lands in Maine, but it also powerfully exemplifies community members interacting with forest lands retained by treaty right.⁷ The tribal historian and tribal historical preservation officer for the Passamaquoddy Tribe, Donald G. Soctomah, said that the return of White Island was "like finding a lost relative" (Hutton 2021). This insight reminds us that Wabanakis in Maine possess their own views about forests that are quite different from the mainstream forest industry today. It is not surprising that some tribal foresters are interested in mature forests, a rich ecosystem that their ancestors knew well. We cannot turn back the hands of time, but humans can strive to recreate past environments with greater ecological balance and more purposeful relationships for humans with forests. This goal of restoration is even more urgent as we face the threats of climate change. A broader and deeper appreciation for and implementation of Wabanaki forest practices is an appropriate policy priority that can benefit forests and communities. The Bomazeen Land Trust,

comprised of Indigenous board members, aims to expand land access and re-connect “community members to ancestral lands” along the Kennebec River and in western Maine.⁸

Confronting climate change, globalization, and international corporations has led some Indigenous people to shift strategies to advance their goals (Hosmer 2012). In Wabanaki homeland, Indigenous-owned non-governmental organizations (NGOs) can stay true to their mission statements, working beyond the immediate goals of their respective tribal governments. NGOs in the Northeast often advance Indigenous rights, retain cultural connections to their homelands, and strive for climate equity and forms of mitigation. The Land Peace Foundation advances the land-based program, Wičuhkemultine, meaning “let’s help one another,” that includes farming on ancestral lands.⁹ The Wičuhkemultine Kinship Community, located on a 213-acre farm in traditional Penobscot homeland on the western side of Penobscot Bay, advances wellness, care, and sovereignty with the land. While about 75 acres are fields for farming, the remaining forested acres will continue to stand and be protected for not only its fruit and nut harvests, but also for its physical, medicinal, and spiritual uses. Similar to Donald Soctomah’s experience of finding a lost relative through the reacquisition of White Island, Wabanaki people are reasserting kinship ties to forest lands that emphasize equal relationships instead of hierarchical ones. Wabanaki forests represent self-sufficiency and knowledge systems that many tribal citizens need so that they can be who they are. These forests also remind others that the repercussions of settler colonialism are complex and ever changing, and Wabanaki leaders need to devise innovative solutions to solve challenges

about their forest lands. Perhaps collaborations with non-Native people can provide powerful results in the health and expanse of Wabanaki forests, provided that non-Native partners embrace forest policy that may have been initially unknown to them (Fernández-Llamazares 2024; Grossman 2017).

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NOTES

- 1 As the first people to witness the sunrise in North America, the term *Wabanaki* originated from the word *Wabanakiak*, meaning “people of the dawn.” This work uses *Wabanaki* as an all-inclusive term that includes the Mi’kmaq, Maliseet (Wolastoquiyik), Passamaquoddy (Peskotomuhkati), and Penobscot, along with other Abenaki groups. These Indigenous groups of the far Northeast inhabit present-day northern New England and eastern Canada (Prins 1994).
- 2 The Latin names of tree species are from (MFS 1995). Two spellings convey slightly different pronunciations between the Penobscots (Gluskabe) and Passamaquoddies (Koluscap). Since the *Wabanaki* refer to black ash as brown ash today, I have used brown ash in the text.
- 3 Hoops held the slats of barrels together.
- 4 The direct quote omits the overuse of the possessive for reading clarity.
- 5 “Tribal Lands in Maine,” *Wabanaki Alliance*. <https://www.wabanakialliance.com/tribal-lands-in-maine>.
- 6 “Forestry,” *Penobscot Nation*. <https://www.penobscotnation.org/departments/departments-of-natural-resources/forestry/>.
- 7 While Pine Island in Big Lake is 120 acres, the Passamaquoddy received 100 acres, leaving the remaining 20 acres as private property.
- 8 “About,” *Bomazeen Land Trust*. <https://www.bomazeenlandtrust.org/about>.

- 9 “Wičuhkemultine Land-Based Programs.” Land Peace Foundation. <https://landpeacefoundation.org/wicuhkemultine-kinship/>.

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