



Indigenous Peoples and the Great Lakes

Mariam Rashidi, Ryerson University
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Overview

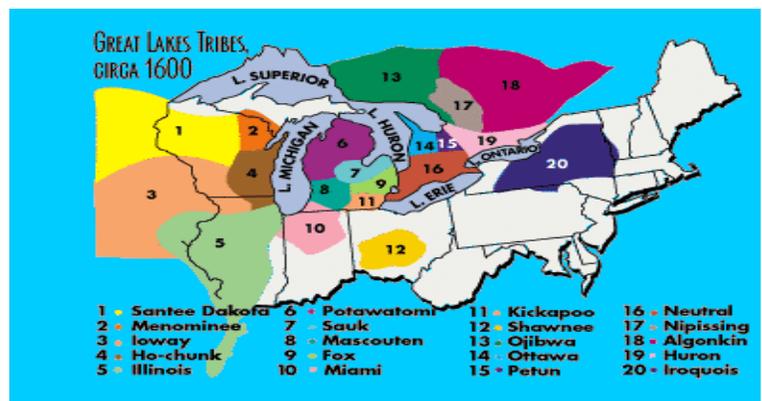
- Indigenous peoples, Aboriginal peoples¹, Indians or Native Peoples, are the original inhabitants of North America, also known as Turtle Island. Indigenous peoples have inhabited this land for tens of thousands of years prior to the arrival European settlers.
- Settlement and development in the Great Lakes region has had serious political ,economic, cultural and environmental implications for Indigenous peoples and communities over the past few hundred years.
- Indigenous values of respect for the environment have largely been ignored and neglected under Western economic development and human settlement models.
- Many Indigenous peoples and communities feel that little or no effort has been put towards developing partnerships with communities that face the consequences of environmental degradation largely as a result of Western-style industrialization (Chiefs of Ontario, 1999, 5).
- Although there are hundreds of Indigenous communities in the Great Lakes region and thousands of Indigenous peoples, including many of Canada's Aboriginal peoples that now represent 4.3 percent of the total Canadian population (Statistics Canada, 2014), many challenges remain related to Indigenous engagement in Great Lakes governance and policy.

Indigenous Peoples, the Environment and the Great Lakes

Aboriginal peoples worldwide share a unique and profound bond with the environment. Respect for nature is rooted within the heart of their existence, is core to their identities, and celebrated in their lifestyles. Quoted in Anne Noonan & Associates, 1999, 4.

There have been roughly 120 Aboriginal bands² that have lived in the Great Lakes basin over history. 75 different First Nations bands have been reported to occupy the Ontario region alone.

(Image retrieved from Milwaukee Public Museum, n.d.)

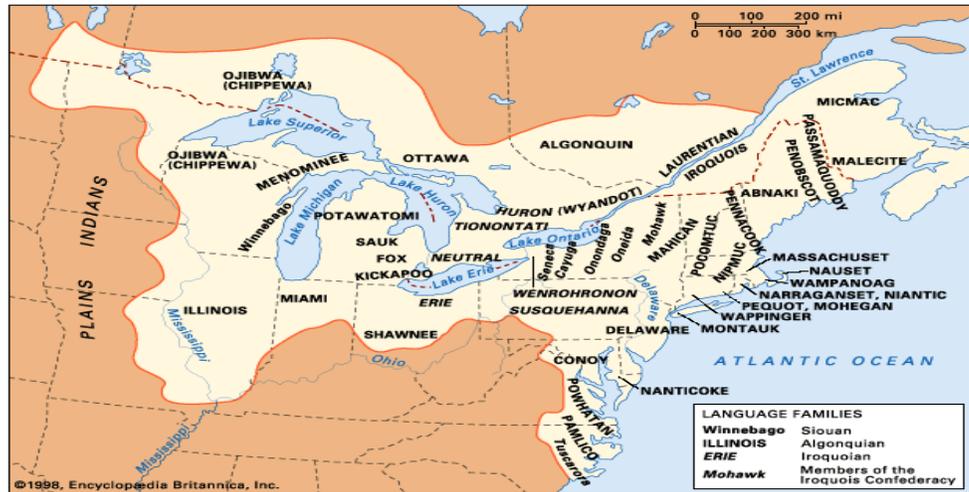


¹ The term Aboriginal refers to the Indian (or First Nations), Inuit and Metis peoples of Canada under section 35(2) of the Constitution Act, 1982 (Dunn, 2010). The commonly used American term for the First Peoples is American Indian. The term Indigenous is used throughout the paper to acknowledge the history of Aboriginal people as the original inhabitants of the land. The term became widely used starting in the 1970s, when Aboriginal groups advocated for their presence in the United Nations (UN) which now uses the term to broadly refer to groups that have had a long settlement and connection to a specific land who have been significantly affected by the imposition of industrial economies, displacement, and settlement of others on their traditional land.

² The term band is a legal term under the *Indian Act* representing a group of status Indians (Indigenous Foundations, 2009).

The major tribes that have occupied the Great Lakes area include: (Great Lakes Information Network, n.d; Hele, 2008)

- Anishinabe
- Chippewa/Ojibwe
- Cree
- Dakota/Sioux
- Huron
- Iroquois
- Menominee
- Mesquakie/Fox
- Miami
- Missouri
- Mohican/Mahican
- Oneida
- Ottawa
- Potawatomi
- Suak/Saques/Sac
- Winnebago



Distribution of Eastern Woodlands Indians.
Courtesy Britannica

(Map retrieved from Great Lakes Information Network)

The lands of these independent nations have been claimed and divided by European colonial settlers since the 1600s (Hele, 2008, xiv). Today, there are currently 75 First Nation communities living along the Great Lakes in Canada (Assembly of First Nations, n.d.). Indigenous peoples see themselves as playing a vital role in making sustainable development a reality in Canada. This is due to their increasing responsibilities for managing their lands, the importance of the environment to their traditional way of life and the fact that some Indigenous communities experience first-hand the adverse effects of environment change. Particularly, Indigenous peoples have expressed their interest in being present in discussions of governance of the Great Lakes, a region they consider their traditional home (Chiefs of Ontario, 2006).

Aboriginal Livelihood and the Environment

Aquatic environments have influenced and support the livelihoods of the hundreds of Aboriginal communities that inhabit land in the Great Lakes region. Indigenous peoples have a unique relationship with their surrounding environments and traditional ecological knowledge.

All First Nations communities living along the Great Lakes in Canada rely on natural resources for their livelihood and participate in some form of fishing activity (Assembly of First Nations, n.d.). The Assembly of First Nations (n.d., p. 3) note that pollution and environmental change have resulted in *“high amounts of industrial toxins, cooling effluents, phosphates, heavy metals and metalloids have diminished the system’s reproductive capacity and created health risks for aquatic populations... Fishing pressures and diversions have altered the composition of local species and provided new routes for endemic invasive species. Additional pressures exist on the aggregate level as a result of climate change and greenhouse gas emissions, which may be responsible for changes in lake levels and dynamics, as well as upland acidification.”* All of these factors significantly impact the day-to-day living and livelihood of Aboriginal communities.



Specific Aboriginal fishery and habitat challenges include:

- Loss of biodiversity may effectively extinguish First Nations rights and Aboriginal Knowledge related to specific species;
- Loss or degradation of fisheries may result in economic losses for First Nation communities stemming from cessation of commercial fisheries;
- Loss or degradation of fisheries may threaten food security for First Nation communities;
- Loss or degradation of fisheries may result in the loss of traditional diets;
- Toxins in fish population may threaten the health of First Nation individuals in the region;
- Habitat degradation may result in the loss of culturally or spiritually significant sites;
- Due to the geographic size and political complexity of the Great Lakes region, First Nations have few remedies against environmental polluters and little ability to effect Great Lakes management policy changes to promote further habitat stability.

(Assembly of First Nations, n.d., p. 8)

Existing Policies and Legislation

The Lakes are regulated by multiple regulations and acts in Canada and the US. In Canada these include: the Fisheries Act, the Canadian Environmental Protection Act, the Clean Water Act, the National Environmental Protection Act, the Great Lakes Toxic Substances Control Agreement.

Of particular importance, is the Canada-US Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement (GLWQA), first signed in 1972 and most recently in 2012. It commits the governments to shared priorities and coordinating actions to restore and protect the chemical, physical and biological integrity of the waters of the Great Lakes.

In amending the agreement in 2012, in consultation and cooperation with other levels of government, Indigenous communities in the Great Lakes region (including First Nations and Métis organizations), businesses, non-governmental entities, and the public will develop programs, technologies and other measures necessary to better understand the Great Lakes ecosystem, and to restore and protect water quality and ecosystem health (Environment Canada, 2013). There are two articles in particular that are important related to Indigenous peoples:

GLWQA Article 3 - General and Specific Objectives

*The Parties shall use best efforts to ensure that water quality standards and other regulatory requirements of the Parties, State and Provincial Governments, **Tribal Governments, First Nations, Métis**, Municipal Governments, watershed management agencies, and other local public agencies are consistent with all of these objectives.*

GLWQA Article 4 – Consultation, Management and Review

The Parties hereby establish a Great Lakes Executive Committee to help coordinate, implement, review and report on programs, practices and measures undertaken to achieve the purpose of this Agreement:
*(a) the Parties shall co-chair the Great Lakes Executive Committee and invite representatives from Federal Governments, State and Provincial Governments, **Tribal Governments, First Nations, Métis**, Municipal Governments, watershed management agencies, and other local public agencies.*

Governance Challenges

Multiple jurisdictions - The multitude of jurisdictions, laws and regulations creates a complex governance system with multiple governments, departments and commissions overseeing various aspects related to environmental integrity and biodiversity (Assembly of First Nations, n.d.).

Duty to consult Indigenous Peoples – Under the GLWQA, US and Canadian laws and policies there is a legal obligation to consult with Indigenous peoples related to decisions and actions that impact Indigenous peoples and communities in the region. In Canada for example, when decisions or actions may adversely impact asserted or established Aboriginal or treaty rights in Canada, there is a duty to consult rooted in: the Honour of the Crown (a legal principle that commits government to act with integrity); and the protection of Aboriginal and treaty rights under section 35 of the Constitution Act, 1982 (Ontario, 2014).

Utilization of Indigenous Ecological Knowledge - The protection of the Great Lakes, the sustainable management of natural resources and ecological integrity have long been recognized and valued by Indigenous peoples living in the Great Lakes region. These values and ecological knowledge are important to the health and well-being of all peoples living in the region yet incorporating these values and traditional ecological knowledge into governance, policies and decision making remains a challenge.

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Images:

Milwaukee Public Museum. (n.d.). *Great Lakes History* <http://www.mpm.edu/wirp/ICW-21.htm>

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