

Forest County Potawatomi

At a tribal climate change conference last December hosted by the Forest County Potawatomi Community, elder Jim Thunder offered a clear, traditional perspective on how his tribe might move forward: "I pray to the Creator that we look back so that we may see ahead. Let us examine our lives so that we are respectful to our fellow humans and to nature. Let us respect our children and, above all, let us live our lives in accordance with our beliefs."

For the Potawatomi Community, prayerful words such as these by tribal elders are marching orders. Jeff Crawford, attorney general for the 1500-member Wisconsin tribe, describes his tribe's general approach to the challenges they face: "Listen to the elders, then translate that into governmental action. That's what I think modern-day professionals working in [environmental protection] can do for the tribes."



The Potawatomi tribe has long experience in melding traditional wisdom with political and practical approaches to ecological stewardship. Three decades ago, when the Exxon Corp. decided to open the world's largest copper-zinc mine 15 miles south of the Potawatomi Tribe's northeastern Wisconsin land (they also own land in the Milwaukee area, for a total of nearly 19,000 acres), on the doorsteps of two other Great Lakes-region tribes, the Potawatomi Community was faced with a fundamental threat. With guidance from their elders, they chose to act.



The Crandon Mine, says Air Resources Program Director Natalene Cummings, "was going to be a huge underground mine, with cyanide leaching right at the headwaters of the Wolf River," a water source that is sacred to the Mole Lake Tribe. "People were concerned about the water, about how long they would be there and whose responsibility it would be to clean it up."

The resulting struggle, in solidarity with other area tribes, helped launch a new era of activism at Potawatomi—a mindset that continues to run strongly through the community. A lot of the early battles involved grassroots donations, grants, and picketing. More than two decades later, after the tribe opened casinos on both branches of their reservation and began to generate significant revenue, they were able to purchase the mine property and shut it down for good.

Crawford says, "This was a good example of how we've been able to evolve with our additional resources to get where we are today, how we've been able to put muscle behind the tribe's environmental beliefs. Once the tribe decided it would translate gaming revenue into government action, they chose to look at things in a different way. So we ended up hiring dozens of experts to attack every single item on the mining application. We also hired several law firms and lobbying firms, and we walked the halls in the local offices, the regional offices,

and in Washington DC. We had a mission, and everyone knew what it was."

Potawatomi's evolution as an environmentally proactive tribe is fueled largely by casino revenue, but the roots of that activism lie in a traditional awareness of their relationship with the natural world. Cummings says of the Potawatomi community, "They have a deep, innate understanding that all things are connected; I hear that over and over from tribal members. They hold a strong belief that they're responsible for keeping things as pure as possible."

Another reflection of that believe is reflected in Potawatomi's recent Class I air redesignation under the Clean Air Act. Finalized in late 2008 after a fifteen-year battle, the new standard for Potawatomi's airshed helps ensure their near-pristine air quality will remain that way-even as two new coal-fired power plants move closer to online status not far to the south.

As with the Crandon Mine, Potawatomi's Class I redesignation required a vigorous fight, with Wisconsin and Michigan as well as regional industrial interests. The tribe is willing to wage such battles because its members understand the long view. And the elders help keep that awareness alive.

Climate Change: The Big Fight



Jim Thunder & Billy Daniels Jr.

Potawatomi elders express growing concern with climate change and its impacts on both the tribe and those outside the immediate community. During that recent climate-change conference, elder Billy Daniels Jr. observed that traditional medicines have grown weaker, and the animals who eat the plants-also considered medicine-are also weaker. He said he doesn't hear his forecasters anymore, the tree toad and the birds. "If I hear them," he said at the conference, "I know what is going to happen today." Elder Jim Thunder spoke of how "the lakes are drying up, the river levels are way down... some of our springs are non-existent." He asked where the small animals, such as the woodchuck, rabbit and squirrel, have gone, and why he no longer hears the night-song of the whippoorwill. "I haven't heard them in a really long time," he said, "probably ten years. The earth is trying to tell us something. You learn by watching what's going on around you."

Several speakers at the conference described climate-change impacts through the eyes of Western science. They spoke of drying springs, changes in forest ecosystems, impacts on wild rice farming, invasion of exotic plants and insects, changing weather patterns, an increasingly earlier maple-syrup harvest, diseases in animals such as moose, shifts in animal populations, disruptions in the timing of bird in-migration and plant and insect growth... the litany of ecological disruptions is long and disturbing. Elders in attendance noted these assessments validated what they've already known by way of traditional prophesies and their own observations.

Potawatomi's earlier struggles over the mine and Class I redesignation not only reflected a strong adherence to traditional beliefs but helped consolidate a mindset of strengthened cohesion and purpose among tribal members. Crawford notes that, although Potawatomi council members are re-elected each year, the tribe's sustainability programs maintain solid, unwavering support year after year.

Those programs pervade the lives and activities of the Potawatomi Community. At the individual and community levels they include efforts such as individual and business recycling. The tribe is looking to grow that component, although the recently depressing price for recycled material makes it tough. Outreach and education efforts are an important part of the mix. Through newspapers and other media residents are urged to keep home thermostats lower and wear sweaters, turn off unused electrical devices, use of nontoxic cleaning and other products, and ensure their homes are well insulated.

With gaming revenues providing a steady cash flow, Potawatomi has constructed new buildings to supplement the older, grant-funded structures built in years past. Presently, the tribe is re-evaluating the sustainability quotient of all their buildings. Crawford says, "Like any other tribe, many of our old buildings...were energy sieves, and we're working to bring them up to modern standards. We've also built new buildings, and we want them to be as green as possible. Many of our current structures are five years old at most. But we've come back to look even at them, because we're not sure they're good enough. We've found instances where we can do things even better. That's what we're doing right now."

The tribe is spending considerable effort and money upgrading building elements such as insulation, light fixtures, light timers, and switches. Government offices in the tribe's northern and southern locations are linked by T1 lines, saving considerable commuting by allowing for "virtual" meetings. Crawford cites a small example of an energy-saving practice at his law offices in Milwaukee: "Everyone assumes when you turn off your computer, scanner, fax machine, and all the others, they're no longer using energy. Well, that's not true." To address those hidden energy costs, the tribe has installed power strips, and when they leave they also turn off the strip. During this interview Crawford sat in a window-lit room rather than using lights. "I have a window," he said. "Why do I need to have a light on?"

The tribe's two casinos are also undergoing a sustainability review; during a recent, major expansion of the Milwaukee casino, they improved on the innovative energy systems already in place. Technologies such as "heat-recovery wheels" channel warm air back into the heating system to reduce heating costs, and digital energy monitoring ensures power isn't wasted. The casinos also employ no-water urinals, low-flow fixtures throughout, and skylighting.

Seeking even greater energy efficiency, a year ago Potawatomi instituted four-day work weeks for some tribal operations, cutting energy use and commuting miles (some employees drive considerable distances to work and back). "We'll be able to document a reduction in our carbon footprint from this," Crawford says. "The questions now are more in terms of productivity and functionality. For instance, some facilities need a 24-hour presence, such as Health and Wellness, our pharmacy, and security operations. Obviously the employees like it, but operationally, we'll probably have to make some adjustments, especially with our service providers."

Energy-Independence and Tribal Sovereignty

Energy independence is a strong value at Potawatomi, and, Crawford believes, a key element in tribal sovereignty. "This has to do with the ability to determine your future, to provide service to members. Just look at fuel costs last year, these radically crippling changes in energy prices. Every tribal government should ask, 'Will we allow ourselves to stay on this incredible roller coaster, or can we become independent of all that and make sure our people have energy when they need it, in a good, green way?'"

Located in the nation's northern latitudes, Potawatomi is limited in the modes of alternative energy it can utilize. The tribe is looking at ways to incorporate passive solar into its energy mix, particularly for individual homes and government buildings. "Solar won't solve all our problems," Crawford points out, "but it will help." He notes that "old-style" energy-saving practices, such as heating pools, building with south-facing windows, and constructing solar rooftop systems that partially heat water for home and office use, could make a serious dent in the tribe's energy consumption.

Wind is another limited option at Potawatomi, but it's one the tribe believes can add significantly to the community's efficiency mix. Crawford says, "We're looking at opportunities on the small-scale. You're starting to see small wind turbines; they almost look like sculptures, pieces of art that can go in people's yards to help that individual homeowner or that government building." Bio-fuel production is another possibility on the tribe's radar. The tribe understands that no single alternative-energy technology will satisfy all their energy demands, but if used together in creative ways their sum total can result in significant energy production-greening their energy mix and also freeing them from the tyranny of outside energy sources.

Activism as SOP

Tribal members feel a strong responsibility to practice their beliefs on the larger scale. When the state of Wisconsin formed a Climate Change Task Force last year, Potawatomi was the only member tribe. The tribe didn't just participate-they staffed three of the five committees with lawyers, lobbyists, experts, making a concrete, beneficial contribution to the project.

The tribe, says Crawford, has been more fortunate than many others, and with that fortune comes responsibilities. "You always have to have food in your membership's belly, basic healthcare, housing for the elders-and that's almost always the priorities of tribal governments. We've been lucky, and our tribe can provide those basics and also pursue other efforts. We believe that's important." The climate change task force's negotiations, he says, yielded a "compromise document; it's not perfect. However, it got nearly unanimous support, and most importantly, the governor has said publicly that he plans to make sure it becomes a living document. We're now doing a statewide media campaign to support that effort."

Crawford points out that "energy-rich" tribes, who reside mostly in the Southwest, can aid in the climate-change fight simply by choosing their customers. "Energy-producing tribes are in a good position to affect the carbon footprint by choosing who burns their resource. If I'm a carbon-resource rich tribe, I can sell to whomever I want to. Should I sell to a company or utility that runs dirty facilities...or to those using the best technology available? Can I insist that my current

companies convert?"

Potawatomi's activism extends even beyond national borders. When Wisconsin entered into contract negotiations for the purchase of Manitoba-based hydropower, the Potawatomi Community pushed successfully for a remarkable agreement: the state cannot claim "renewable energy portfolio" credits (mandatory percentages of alternative energy in a state's total energy portfolio) for Canadian hydropower purchases until affected First Nations are reimbursed by the Canadian government for land inundated by the Manitoba dams.

Changing the Future Means Changing Attitudes

"We don't want to debate who caused it but what can we do about it?" Crawford says of the global warming crisis. He asks, "Will humans become the next dinosaur, or are we going to adapt and evolve? It's pretty apparent that all our tribal members will have to change their lifestyle, going back in some respects to our old ways, with less reliance on technology, the automobile and so on. That's true of every American. But people have to be educated. It's a generational thing; it's hard to get any American to think beyond one, maybe two generations. It's hard to get Western scientists to think beyond a couple of generations. That gives you about 25-50 years out. I think our tribe, and other tribes, need to think long-term, seven generations." He's gratified that scientists involved in climate-change research and policy now seem to be looking beyond the immediate future.

"Even our tribal members," he says, "will have to alter their mindsets. We use electricity, our kids have TVs and electronic devices. We drive cars, and we sit inside instead of sitting outside. So that's part of the educational component, to reconnect our youth to the environment." And the best way to begin, he says, is by listening to the elders.

Resources

Forest County Potawatomi Community: www.fcpotawatomi.com/

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For more information, contact:

- Sue Wotkyns, Climate Change Program Manager, Institute for Tribal Environmental Professionals, susan.wotkyns@nau.edu
- Mehrdad Khatibi, Director, Institute for Tribal Environmental Professionals, mehrdad.khatibi@nau.edu