

# 1

## Sustainable Development Visions and the Menominee Indian Tribe of Wisconsin

IN 1969 CHARLIE FRECHETTE, a Menominee Indian and the vice president of Menominee Enterprises, Inc., quoted an unnamed tribal leader as saying,

[S]tart with the rising sun and work toward the setting sun, but take only the mature trees, the sick trees, and the trees that have fallen. When you reach the end of the reservation, turn and cut from the setting sun to the rising sun, and the trees will last forever. (Spindler and Spindler 1971, 201)

When this statement was made, the Menominee Indian Tribe was in the midst of the termination experiment by the United States government. Public Law 83-399, known on the Menominee Indian Reservation as the Termination Act, had ended federal responsibility for the Menominee as called for under the treaties signed by the tribe with the U.S. government during a period ranging from 1817 to 1848. In the official language of the Termination Act,

[T]he responsibility of the United States to furnish all such supervision and services to the tribe and to members thereof because of their status as Indians, shall cease on December 31, 1960 or on such earlier date as may be agreed upon by the tribe and by the secretary [of the Interior]. (PL 83-399, 1954)

In the language of those Menominee who fought to replace termination with a new federal policy that they called restoration,

Thanks to termination, the tribal treasury has been long since virtually depleted; the lumbering operation teeters on insolvency; new

economic developments bring no direct benefit to the living standard of the community but only keep the tribal corporation [Menominee Tribal Enterprises] afloat; the hospital is closed, with no medical care available to the community; the utility companies have been sold; and hundreds of Menominee have been forced to leave home to find employment, many only to trade rural poverty for urban slums. (National Committee to Save the Menominee People and Forests, 1972, 11)

Clearly, Mr. Frechette's statement in 1969 was a remarkable one for a member of a devastated Indian tribe to make. The Menominee, in little over a decade, had gone from being one of the wealthier Indian tribes in the nation, with a cash balance of \$9,960,895 invested with the U.S. Treasury, to one of the most impoverished. The tribe had just a few years earlier owned its own hospital, had plenty of work for most of its able-bodied men, ran its own well-functioning court system, and owned its own utility companies. In 1969 the situation declared by the National Committee to Save the Menominee People and Forests in 1972 was already true. The Menominee termination experiment had exacted a terrible toll on the Menominee people.

Yet, in 1969 an obvious economic remedy existed for the Menominee plight. Of the 233,902 acres of unallotted land along the upper Wolf River in northeastern Wisconsin that made up the reservation prior to termination, approximately 95 percent was still forested land owned and managed by Menominee Tribal Enterprises. Although a thicket of federal and State of Wisconsin legislation stood between the ability to clear-cut these reserves, a consummated sale of timber harvested wholesale, and the actual decision to clear-cut, the value of the lumber in these forests was extraordinary. In 1961 the Menominee forest represented 10 percent of the total standing timber in the State of Wisconsin and was the largest hardwood forest in the state. The fair market value of the lumber, if it had been harvested in 1961, was set at 38 million dollars by the Supreme Court of the United States as the result of a case, *Menominee Tribe of Indians v. The United States of America*, filed by the tribe in 1981 (Supreme Court of the United States 1984, 175a). Some appraisers at the time believed that the Court's valuation was understated. Menominee land, of course, had a substantial additional value beyond the logs that could be harvested, especially the land shoring lakes, streams, or rivers—all three of which the Menominee have in abundance. Recreation land was becoming increasingly valuable in 1960s America, and the Menominee

had a lot of land that possessed the values prized for recreation. During the termination period, this fact would have enormous consequences for the tribe and its future.

Ending Menominee poverty could have been relatively simple. All the Menominee had to do was to convince federal and state governments the termination policy had been what it was—a disaster—and convince the key players from those governments that the only way the Menominee had out of the dilemma they had been forced into by the U.S. Congress was to allow them the freedom to join the free market economy enjoyed and supported overwhelmingly by the Menominee's fellow citizens. Fewer than three thousand Menominee, men, women, and children lived in Menominee County, the political entity established conterminous with reservation boundaries after termination had taken effect in 1961. By selling their forests and land at any point during the termination period, which did not end until passage of the Menominee Restoration Act in 1972, and then carefully investing the resulting capital sums, the Menominee could have taken a large step toward lifting themselves out of poverty for both present and future times.

Still, that was not the Menominee way. The Menominee way was identified by Charlie Frechette when he quoted a Menominee leader: "and the trees will last forever." The Menominee did not object to harvesting the mature, the sick, and the fallen trees, but when all was said, the trees had to last forever. The beauty and substance of the forest, with its white pine canopies, its lake shores crowned with maple, white pine, red pine, and birch, the forested banks of the wild, powerful Wolf River, had to be preserved forever. There was no question about that. The Menominee people might live in poverty, but living in poverty was better than living in a landscape denuded of forest and made to look uncared for and scrubby. In the long term the Menominee were a woodland people, and in the end they would be cared for by the forest.

This attitude, the decisions the Menominee have made since 1908 and the passage of the LaFollette Act that allowed the Menominee a forest harvest of twenty million board feet per year, through the present, constitute a significant environmental record with international consequences. Just how significant this record is can be partially measured by a recent reception held at the United Nations in New York where four indigenous people—the Menominee of Wisconsin, the Quichua from the Amazon forests, the Kuna of Panama, and the Hoopa of British Columbia, Canada—were all honored for their con-

tributions to the world's environment (Shawano Leader, 21 April 1995, 1). In February of 1996 the Menominee were again honored when Vice President Al Gore awarded the Menominee a Presidential Award from the President's Council on Sustainable Development.

The Menominee's contribution, according to Larry Waukau, the current President of Menominee Tribal Enterprises, the company formed after passage of the Restoration Act to succeed Menominee Enterprises, Inc., was the tribe's land ethic and management philosophy that

has always contained the three elements of a sustainable system. First he [the forest] must be sustainable for future generations. Second, the forest must be cared for properly to provide for the needs of the people. And third, we keep all the pieces of the forest to maintain diversity. (*Shawano Leader* 1995, 1)

Another measure of this significance is the number of professional foresters, environmentalists, university teachers, political leaders, and other visitors who come to see the Menominee forest every year. In 1994 just under 2,000 visitors from all of the world's major continents visited the forest. The count for 1995 and 1996 exceeded that for 1994 (Waukau 1994).

One motive these visitors have for coming to the Menominee homeland is to see the forest and to talk to the foresters and Menominee leaders responsible for preserving the forest, but an equally important motive is the suspicion that the Menominee know something about sustainability and sustainable development the rest of the world does not know. Indigenous people are mentioned as a primary source of information about sustainable development in much of the sustainable development literature, ranging from the Brundtland report (The World Commission on Environment and Development, 1988) to the philosophical, idealistic ruminations of a writer like Thomas Berry (Berry 1988). What the Menominee have achieved with their forest has the feel of what scholars and environmentalists mean by sustainable development. Here is a people, paraphrasing Larry Waukau's words, who have sustained the forest that has been in their care for close to a century and a half. They have worked to keep the forest's diversity. But, at the same time, they have also developed and used the reservation's forest and water resources to properly provide for the needs of the Menominee people.

Certainly the idea of sustainable development has become

increasingly important to the contemporary world. New books on sustainable development have been appearing with increasing rapidity since the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (the Earth Summit) held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in June of 1992, and the number of articles appearing in professional journals has been expanding at what seems to be an exponential rate.

The link between the way the Menominee manage their forest and the idea of sustainable development is largely assumed throughout the reservation, especially among the reservation's leadership. The College of the Menominee Nation, a tribally founded land grant institution of higher education that has a reservation-based campus, has even established a Sustainable Development Institute that includes many of the most important Menominee leaders on its Advisory Council. The primary purposes of the Institute are to establish a Menominee model of sustainable development and to conduct research that helps the Menominee people use their resource base in a more sustainable manner. Reservation leaders have also not been shy about telling their story in ways that garner the maximum amount of exposure. This is indicated by the application submitted by the Reservation to the President's Council on Sustainable Development for the purpose of receiving President's Award recognition for their sustainable development efforts.

One of this book's burdens is to clearly establish the link between Menominee management and sustainable development, and then to examine both its constituent parts and how it relates to the larger discussion cataloged in the library of literature on sustainable development. The hypothesis is that a careful study of the Menominee record can lead to a better understanding of processes that might lead to a sustainable world. The most significant question this book avoids is whether or not there is wisdom in the pursuit of sustainable development policies in today's world. The literature on the environmental crisis is so massive, and the existence of a state of crisis is so well documented elsewhere, that an assumption is made that all human beings should be seriously studying and thinking about how we, collective mankind, can come into a better balance with the earth's ecological systems. The reason the Menominee example is so important is that it holds the promise of providing a series of lessons about how we might create a sustainable world that can prosper into the future.

The basic question this book pursues is: Can lessons be learned from the Menominee model of sustainable development that can be

used to help establish a general theory of sustainable development? Secondary questions are: What are the elements of the Menominee sustainable development model? How significant are the Menominee sustainable development accomplishments? What role have history, culture, spirituality, technology, science, and political structures played in the development of the Menominee sustainable development model? Are there proposals developed in the past or proposals in the current sustainable development or sustainable environmental economics literature that are supported by the Menominee sustainable development experience? What elements of the model are applicable to societal structures larger than those of the Menominee? Does the Menominee model provide clues about the best way to pursue economic development if the goal is to use the world's resources in a sustainable manner? These questions are addressed sequentially in the chapters of this book.

## The Task of Construction of a Menominee Model of Sustainable Development

The task of constructing a Menominee model of sustainable development is not an easy one. There are a number of reasons for this. First, the range of material that must be covered is vast. Historical, cultural, religious, economic, bicultural, and anthropological aspects affect the Menominee story along with scientific and technological aspects. The Menominee record itself is spread through primary historical documents, the work of anthropologists, the writings of linguists, newspaper stories, Native American literature, court documents, business documents, treaties between the tribe and the U.S. government, State of Wisconsin legislation, tribal legislation, U.S. legislation, scientific literature, social science literature, and the words and feelings of Menominee themselves. Fortunately, a wealth of material on the Menominee, ranging back to the earliest days of contact with French explorers and Jesuit missionaries, exists. First-rate anthropologists such as Walter J. Hoffman, Alanson Skinner, Felix M. Keesing, George and Louise Spindler, and the linguist Leonard Bloomfield have written book-length studies, and a number of historians, including David Wrone, David Beck, Patricia Ourada, Verne F. Ray, and Nicholas Peroff, have published extensive works on the tribe.

These documents and studies show that the Menominee live in an

exceptionally complex, acculturating society. Although considerable tribal cohesiveness exists, at the same time, religious, cultural, economic, and attitudinal differences have resulted from three centuries of contacts with European and American culture. Ideas and attitudes that have led the Menominee to their current understanding and adherence to sustainable development have their roots in both the tribe's cohesion and the acculturative strategies it has used to adapt to a succession of non-Indian societies, starting with the French, then changing to the English, and finally ending up with the American. Both history and religion have played major roles in the creation of the reservation's sustainable development ethic, and Indian culture has helped make an activist environmental stance part of the tribe's Indian identity.

Perhaps the most startling message in this book is that sustainable development, at least on the Menominee Reservation, has little to do with an understanding of Marxist, capitalist, or any other kind of economics. Decision making about the forest is centered in Menominee Tribal Enterprise's Forestry Department, headed by Marshall Pecore, a lifelong resident of Menominee, who is also a trained forester. The Forestry Department is both a division of Menominee Tribal Enterprises, the business and sawmill management entity responsible for profiting from forest harvest operations, and the protector of the forest. As has happened so often in the past, decisions about what trees to cut and when to cut them are made by the rules spoken so eloquently when Charlie Frechette quoted an unnamed chief: "But take only the mature trees, the sick trees, and the trees that have fallen." The methods used to decide which tree to cut and which to leave alone in any one stand of trees are highly technical and based on a rigorous scientifically based understanding of the forest. The value of one type of lumber on the market versus the value of another type plays little role in the process even though Menominee Tribal Enterprises is a for-profit business, roundly criticized by tribal members when it fails to turn a profit. On the reservation, tribal members commonly admit, with both regret and chagrin, that the Enterprises is only partially a business. Its first duty is to the forest's welfare. Its second duty is to the tribal membership's welfare. Individual Menominee expect to see a monetary return from their ownership in Menominee Tribal Enterprises only when the first two duties have been addressed.

This does not mean that markets do not play a role in Menominee life. They play an enormous role. Menominee have the same appetite

for consumer goods that other Americans have. A visit to any major store in Shawano, the town nearest to the reservation, on any Saturday night will reveal the number of Menominee taking full part in the American economy. The Enterprise is also always striving to make a profit through improving the efficiency of its operations, and it sometimes succeeds.<sup>1</sup> But the forest and the attitudes and ideas constituting Menominee sustainable development (a long-term economic decision) are more important to the Menominee than any short-term economic decision. In the end, the forest is the people, and without the forest, as the reservation saying goes, the people will die.